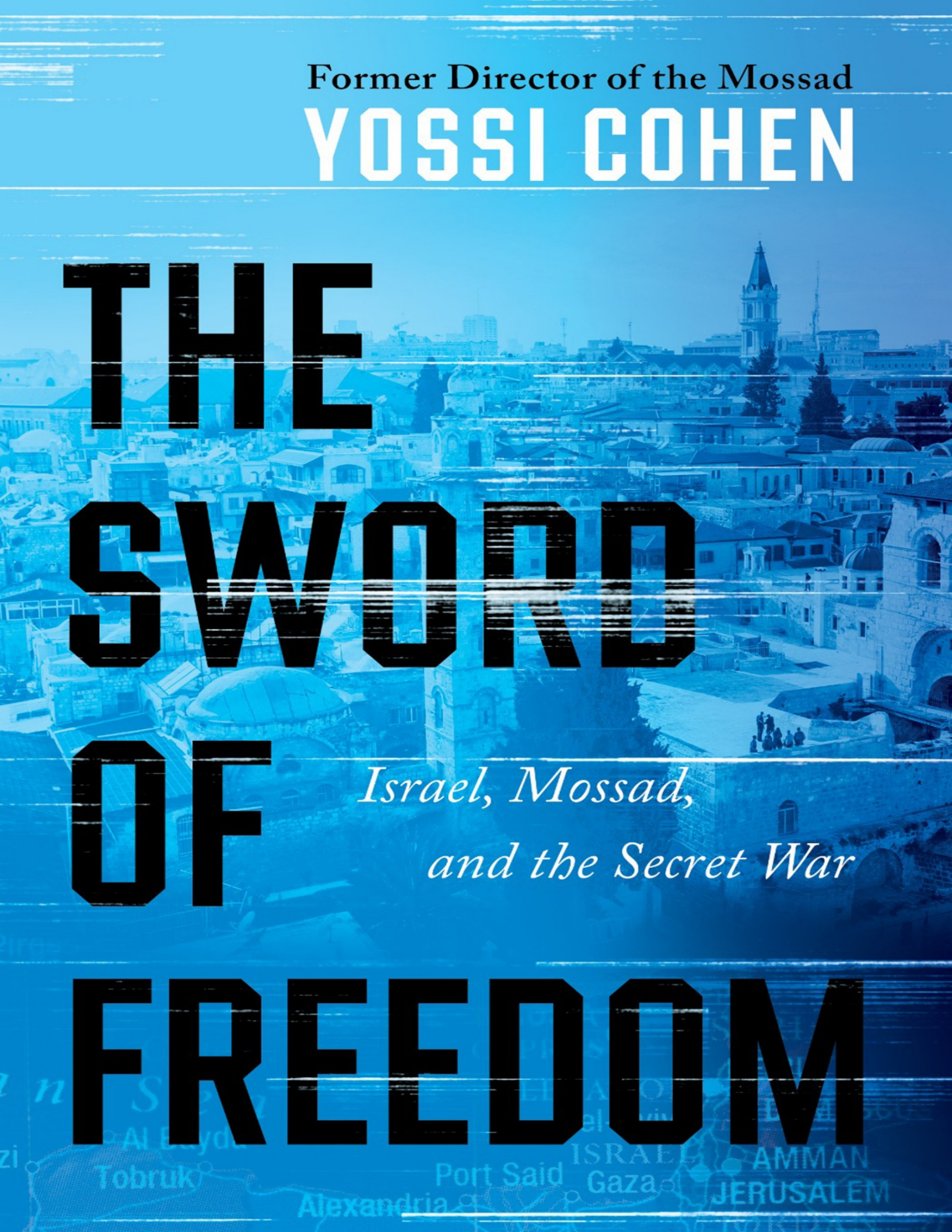
Former Director of the Mossad

YOSSI COHEN

THE SWORD OF FREEDOM

Israel, Mossad, and the Secret War



THE SWORD *of* FREEDOM

ISRAEL, MOSSAD, *and the* SECRET WAR

YOSSI COHEN

BROADSIDE BOOKS

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Epigraph

Only an iron wall of Jewish force can guarantee the security of the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.

—FROM ZE'EV JABOTINSKY, "THE IRON WALL" (1923)

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Introduction

The Ultimate Incentive

Modern wars no longer end in absolute victory or abject surrender, yet the state of Israel must win any conflict it enters. That, in a single sentence, sums up the complexities of the Middle East, a place of contradiction and cyclical confrontation that rarely gives peace a chance.

The region's problems are historical and defy simplistic solutions, yet, for us in Israel, and for the Jewish people, they are framed by an eternal truth and an enduring vision. We have the ultimate incentive to prevail, because our struggle is existential. The Jewish people do not have an option or alternative. We have nowhere else to go but the state of Israel.

We spent more than two thousand years as outcasts, traveling around the world. Our lands were confiscated and conquered by so many enemies, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Ottomans, and the British. The slaughter of six million Jews in the Second World War was the largest Holocaust, but not the first one. Jews have been consistently slaughtered by their host nations.

Even as we prepared for the formation of our own country we were forced into a war of independence between November 1947 and July 1949, in which more than six thousand Israelis, one percent of the Jewish population, were killed in action. Fighting raged from the Sinai Peninsula to the northern borders with Lebanon and our southernmost city, Eilat.

We are sustained by the spirit of the future and the lessons of the past. Having been threatened continually, we believe the only solution lies in our right of worship and our entitlement to build our own nation, without being subordinate to others. Our patriotism is deep-rooted. Together with our faith, it shapes our collective consciousness.

Antisemitism has surged in an era of disinformation and denial. It is a global scourge, a brutalizing force that feeds off ignorance and manifests itself in scrawled Nazi symbols and the posturing of newly emboldened propagandists, aided by their naïve apologists. Its impact stretches across the world from east to west.

As Jews, we look deeply within ourselves but cannot ignore the bigger picture. Our national home should always be open, not just for us Israelis living in the Jewish nation, but also for the Jewish diaspora. They will have to work hard to build a new life in our country, should they wish to settle here, but they will be valued and protected.

I believe in the continuing relevance of men like Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the Jewish state, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement, and David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of modern Israel. Their ideals and philosophies are applicable in a modern context.

Herzl was an Austro-Hungarian Jewish lawyer, writer, and activist who founded modern political Zionism. Confronted by widespread antisemitism in Vienna, he reasoned that Jewish assimilation was impossible. His pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*, published in 1896, outlined his vision of a Jewish homeland in the Holy Land.

He died tragically young, of a heart condition at the age of forty-four, but his influence and his dream endure. He is specifically referred to in our Declaration of Independence and is officially recognized as "the spiritual father of the Jewish State." Jabotinsky also did not live to see independence. He died in 1940, aged fifty-nine.

He argued that the only way to a lasting peace was the establishment of a strong Jewish state. This, he reasoned, would have the ultimate effect of moderating Arab leaders, who would be more open to "mutual concessions." He considered it impossible to eject the Arabs from Palestine, and accepted the concept of two nations in the Holy Land provided it guaranteed a Jewish majority. In practising his ideology, the so-called Iron Wall, the new Israel would strongly protect itself while conducting relations with its neighbors.

Ben-Gurion envisaged the new nation as a dynamic force, drawing on substantial migration from the US and the Soviet Union, but his idealism was hard-edged. He could be blunt, dogmatic, cynical and confrontational. He insisted that Judaism is not merely a religion, but also a nationalistic

philosophy. He alienated American Jewry, in particular, with his belief that an authentic Jewish life could be undertaken only in Israel.

Ben-Gurion's spirit of defiance endures. We are not going to cower under rocket barrages or succumb to terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. We are ready to fight, because we have to win. In order to maintain a country like ours in the face of historically hostile neighbors, we have to have extreme defensive and offensive capabilities. The force we have created is, and will ever be, exceptionally effective. It simply has to be.

As someone who has devoted a lifetime to the defense of my country, eventually becoming head of the Mossad, our pivotal foreign intelligence agency, following a spell as national security adviser, I take pride in understanding the nature of threats facing us and countering them covertly, powerfully, and preemptively around the globe.

In addition to our intelligence assets, we win because we have QME, a qualitative military edge. Despite the initial disaster of October 7, we have the best technical equipment and the biggest, best-trained army in the region, augmented by brave, experienced reservists, whose recent sacrifices have been profound.

I have a Mossad gene in my body. The job, and espionage, is in my blood. After all, it consumed me for thirty-eight years until my retirement from the organization in June 2021. Self-sufficiency, ingenuity, and emotional intelligence are tested almost to the point of destruction from the earliest days of training.

Tutors want to see how you react to being exposed to uncertainty and tension. They need to know if you can blend into the background. They assess your ability to think clearly in difficult circumstances and completely new surroundings. They challenge you, confront you, do anything they can to disorient or unbalance you.

We learn to insinuate ourselves into the minds of our enemies. We appreciate their thought processes, cultural instincts, and political motivations. We plan assiduously, over the long term, but have the capacity to respond quickly if the need arises. These attributes, strengthened by a sense of daring and ability to think laterally, lead to our greatest successes.

Strategic missions are built with the care and cunning an operative uses in creating and inhabiting a character in a cover story. I must admit I had a quiet smile when, on becoming the first foreign leader to be invited to the

White House in President Trump's second term, our prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, presented him with a golden pager.

It was taken as an artful reference to last September's clandestine operation, in which thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies, lined with explosives, were detonated by an encrypted message that required them to be held by Hezbollah terrorists. The physical and psychological damage this inflicted devastated the terrorist organization and signaled a turning point in the war.

Bringing such a complex, multilayered Mossad mission to a fateful, stunning conclusion more than a decade after its inception reaffirmed Israel's reputation for exacting ruthless, sophisticated, and devastatingly effective revenge. That aura of strength helps to build unlikely, mutually beneficial relationships.

My insistence on a mission to steal Iran's entire nuclear archive from a Tehran suburb in 2018 stretched the credulity of my closest colleagues. Yet, thanks to two years of meticulous planning, and the courage and resourcefulness of a handpicked team, it exposed Iran's lies to the world. They must never be trusted again.

I applauded President Trump's decision to exit the Iranian nuclear deal in his first term. I continue to have the greatest confidence in his ability to maximize pressure on enemies, most forcibly expressed in his sustained determination to deny Iran the capacity to produce nuclear weapons. The mullahs are exposed as never before; Tehran is economically weak. It has lost many of its allies and much of its influence in the Middle East. It will have to listen to the new mood music in Washington, DC.

Steve Witkoff, the president's Middle East envoy, wasted no time in establishing a reputation as an assertive, hard-edged mediator. Unwilling to indulge in empty negotiations, or to recycle old arguments, he signaled a fundamental change in tempo and focus.

Everything was predicated on President Trump's legacy as an unorthodox peacemaker. He wants to establish himself on the pantheon of bold, far-sighted global leaders. His idiosyncratic, unconventional thinking has given a moribund debate on the future of Gaza new impetus and an additional dimension.

I worked with three US presidents and administrations between 2013 and 2021. Relations with President Obama were difficult and challenging for Israel, and though President Biden was a true friend of Israel, his legacy

in the region is insubstantial. My experience of working with President Trump is of a man who values leadership and loyalty, which he is prepared to reciprocate.

The teams he assembles around him, especially in the CIA and State Department, are decisive, determined and diligent. Just as I respected and admired the likes of Mike Pompeo and Gina Haspel in his first administration, I have been impressed by such prominent figures as Marco Rubio and Steve Witkoff in the current incarnation.

The president was typically forthright in quickly imposing financial and travel sanctions on officials and their family members who assist in ICC (International Criminal Court) investigations of US citizens or allies. His executive order accused the ICC of engaging "in illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally, Israel."

By also defunding a corrupted organization like UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), his administration has signaled its determination to avoid the West's past mistakes, in offering financial support while the politics of destruction and negativity persist. It invites other Arab nations and the Gulf States to be more proactive.

I firmly believe leaders appreciate you when you are determined about your country's needs but you understand theirs too. It's a very simple equation. As far as some leaders are concerned, I don't agree with their actions, or accept them, but I understand their rationale. That gives me the information I need to make the intellectual leap into his shoes and realize, "Okay. That's the story here. That's the strategy."

I have had to become familiar with many world leaders. Vladimir Putin is one who operates on many levels, occasionally simultaneously. Our working relationship, based on a common background in the intelligence community, was intense but productive. He is a masterly geopolitician, a deeply strategic thinker, and natural leader.

By hosting thirty-six world leaders from nations including China, India, UAE, Egypt, and Iran at a summit of the BRICS group of emerging economies in October 2024, he countered perceptions of Russia's isolation, underlined the futility of Western sanctions, and aligned himself with the principle of a new world order.

President Trump works quickly and logically. He cuts deals. It was extremely significant that, within a month of his inauguration, he had sent a

three-man team to Riyadh for direct talks with their Russian counterparts. The setting for such a meeting, which in the past would traditionally been held somewhere like Europe, signaled huge respect for Saudi Arabia's political prominence and economic potential.

The identities of the participants, and the Saudi mediators, was revealing. Steve Witkoff was joined by National Security Adviser Mike Waltz and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who had already spoken at length to his counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. I know from long personal experience that Russia's veteran foreign minister is sophisticated, shrewd, and extremely resilient.

He was joined by diplomat Yuri Ushakov, another of President Putin's most trusted allies. We have worked together a lot. A former ambassador to the United States, he understands the Republican psyche. The presence of Kirill Dmitriev, head of Russia's Direct Investment Fund, underlined the economic importance of the talks. The hosts, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and National Security Adviser Musaed al-Aiban, are key aides to Mohammed bin Salman (often called MBS), Saudi Arabia's crown prince and prime minister.

I have great faith in MBS as a pivotal figure in the region. I have found him to be tough but fair, perceptive and pragmatic. At the age of only forty, he is the de facto ruler of a kingdom with one of the youngest populations in the G20. He has the potential to personify an era-defining shift in emphasis and expectation.

The kingdom has the advantage of being at the crossroads of three continents and at the juncture of developed and emerging markets; he has already been extremely successful in balancing competing geopolitical interests. He is at the vanguard of a new generation of regional leaders.

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE and the ruler of Abu Dhabi, is another figure of great substance and a remarkable leader. He has made meaningful progress in developing relations with Europe, where attitudes toward the Middle East are fragmented. In particular, he has forged important relationships with major countries in the EU like France and Italy.

We know if Israel wants to be treated as a significant player on the world stage—it does, and it is—it has to have assets to trade. A national security adviser from an Arab nation put it this way: "You know, Yossi, this is the equation. We have the money; you have the bridge and the brains.

Let's join forces and change the region together." That bridge was formed of information and experience. He was also referring to Israel's technological expertise. He has never forgotten my help, in advising on things like a cohesive security infrastructure. The significance of such a strategic connection, established across traditional boundaries, cannot be overestimated.

Palestinian terror organizations continue to make the strategic mistake of attempting to apply the terrorism model. We do not communicate our reasoning for war in an effective or persuasive manner, but I am not sure we can ever win over international public opinion.

I am far from alone in rejecting claims of genocide and war crimes backed by compromised organizations like the ICC and ICJ (the International Court of Justice). There is a huge debate within Israel on how best to counter that, but I know the truth. The world must know that truth.

Gaza's future in its current form is untenable because of Palestinian rejectionism, an intransigence that sustains hatred. Hamas continues to reject Israel's right to exist. They threaten to repeat and intensify the outrages of October 7.

They broke cover, literally and figuratively, during the grotesque charade of their release of hostages in the initial phase of the ceasefire agreement, where fighters suddenly emerged from behind Gaza's human shields to perform for the cameras. They may proclaim themselves as winners, but that is incidental to the point of irrelevance.

What did they gain from massacring 2,000 Israeli citizens, and taking 251 men, women, and children hostage? Precisely nothing. More than twenty thousand of their operatives were killed in the resulting fourteen-month conflict, and large parts of the enclave were destroyed. What are they attempting to do, in behaving as if nothing has changed? They continue to deny their people a better life.

President Trump has focused global attention on the central question: how will Gaza be rebuilt? It is clear that no one else has a workable long-term plan for the reconstruction of a war-ravaged area, strewn with unexploded bombs and booby traps. Even without the pestilential presence of Hamas gunmen, Gaza is a death trap.

In the seventeen years since they seized power, Hamas has wrecked its economy, embezzled its aid, and built nothing more than a tunnel system

designed with the express ideological intention of turning the strip into a weaponized hellscape dedicated to destruction.

Assessing Gaza's potential might require a leap of the imagination, but it is considerable. It sits at the crossroads of two ancient trade routes, with breathtaking natural beauty and a stunning Mediterranean beachfront. It has huge offshore reserves of natural gas.

Israel's past failure to help source sustainable, suitably protected external funding is an enduring regret. Financial support from a source traditionally sympathetic to Hamas, such as Qatar, is likely to be unacceptable to both Israel and the US, but despite the conflict triggered by October 7, the region offers reasons for optimism.

One of my most memorable moments as director of the Mossad was the signing of the Abraham Accords Declaration at the White House in September 2020. Despite subsequent events, the agreement between the United States, Israel, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco remains a tangible legacy of President Trump's first administration, and of the leaders of those countries.

It took a few years of delicate, covert negotiation to bring the accords, and simultaneous peace treaties with the UAE and Bahrain, to a historic conclusion. In addition to Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain, and King Mohammed VI of Morocco were wise and supportive.

Compared to leaders of such distinction, the immediate lack of a moderate Palestinian leader with whom to do business is damning. Despite his promise to remove preferential financial treatment for terrorist prisoners and the families of those terrorists killed on active duty, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, is inarguably yesterday's man.

His age, eighty-nine, is secondary as a disqualifying issue to his habitual reluctance to negotiate in good faith. The mindset has not changed. Rawhi Fattouh, his reluctantly designated successor is seventy-five; nothing in his background, as a veteran member of Fatah's old guard, suggests he offers anything different.

The region is likely to remain fluid for the first half of President Trump's second term, as the implications of the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria become apparent. The early signs are that Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, the interim president who led the uprising using his nom de

guerre of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, understands what he needs to do to rebuild his shattered, bankrupt country.

His first official foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia, where he performed Umrah in Mecca and received the rare privilege of entering the Kaaba. In addition to spiritual sustenance, he was clearly seeking investment to repair infrastructure and rebuild the economy. He reached out to Türkiye, took the pragmatic precaution of refusing to rule out Russia keeping its strategically important ports, and opened channels of communication with President Putin.

It remains to be seen whether he engages with the new mood created by President Trump, and recognizes the advantages of a cautious yet mutually beneficial relationship with its powerful neighbor Israel. His history as an Al-Qaeda fighter in Iraq warrants caution.

Since our security is strengthened by peace treaties, I hope that the Abraham Accords will be expanded in the months and years to come. A normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia would be a game changer. But, for the avoidance of doubt, domestic public opinion in Israel supports the erasure of Hamas.

This hardened significantly in early February when the first three male hostages were released under the terms of the initial ceasefire deal. Their pale, gaunt condition and evident mental turmoil spoke of the brutality of their treatment in captivity and summoned uniquely painful images of the past.

There is no triumphalism in Israel as the Middle East stands on the verge of far-reaching change. Until every hostage is accounted for the mood will be dark. October 7 is destined to be a sombre Memorial Day. It is a wound that will take many years to heal.

We must never, ever forget the horrors perpetrated on the innocent on that murderous morning, but I strongly believe in the spirit of Israel, the Jewish spirit. It is unique and unquenchable. I am confident my country will flourish in the future, and across many centuries to come.

Chapter 1

The Day the World Changed

Our darkest hour was just before dawn, which broke at 6:29 a.m. in Gaza on October 7, 2023. Several thousand Hamas terrorists broke through the border fence with Israel in multiple locations, forming the first wave of an unprecedented invasion by land, sea, and air. Their intent was murderous, their methods depraved, their impact catastrophic.

I had houseguests on that fateful Saturday, toward the end of our Jewish high holidays. It was Simchat Torah, a time for reading and renewal. A celebration of our culture and deeply held beliefs, the day traditionally stimulates a spirit of gratitude and humility underpinned by a sense of resilience that had never been more appropriate.

Mobile telephones sprang into life simultaneously, with calls, texts, or WhatsApp messages, as the first rays of daylight lightened the sky above my home city of Modi'in, situated approximately halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

People were waking up to a world that had changed irrevocably. Sirens were wailing across southern and central Israel, signaling a concerted rocket attack. Something terrible had obviously happened in the south, but details were scarce and rumors were rife. We were in a living nightmare, gripped by an awful sense of foreboding.

The morning was such a blur that I remember few precise details. All I know is that I was constantly making or receiving calls or messages from family, friends, or former colleagues in the security establishment. It was like being in an echo chamber. Did you see that report? Have you heard this? What is going on? How many terrorists are in our territory? What do they want?

I had an elevated level of access, because of my security status, but all across the country similar scenes and conversations were being enacted. The nation suffered vicariously through news outlets, which in the beginning of the conflict were the best, but an imperfect, source of intelligence and information. It was a torrent of bad news without context or confirmation.

As a former national security adviser, and director of the Mossad, Israel's primary foreign intelligence agency, I had a shrewd idea of the nature of the discussions being held at the highest level between the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, his closest advisers and the heads of the Israeli Defense Forces, Southern Command, and the various domestic, military, and foreign intelligence organs.

I know—I don't assume—there was a lot of heat, but not a lot of light. I called David Barnea, who succeeded me as head of the Mossad in March 2021, seeking clarity. Our conversation centered on a fundamental problem. So many events were taking place simultaneously no one in the establishment understood, with any degree of certainty, what the big picture looked like.

The few strands of reality that began to emerge as the hours passed, and Bibi Netanyahu's announcement that we were in a state of war, formed knots in the pit of the stomach. Soldiers and civilians were sacrificed. Entire families were slaughtered or abducted. Gunmen in pickup trucks rampaged from house to house in Israeli communities, seeking victims, regardless of age, sex, innocence, or infirmity. Hundreds of peaceful young people were murdered or kidnapped or fled for their lives in the desert.

I quickly decided my usefulness lay in working on potential solutions to problems that were yet to be fully formed. It was obviously the biggest strategic and operational failure, in military, political, and intelligence terms, since a force led primarily by Egypt and Syria had launched a surprise attack on Yom Kippur, in 1973. I was shocked to the core by the magnitude of events, but not entirely surprised by them.

I learned over many years working in the field, recruiting and operating agents, that anger is both an instructive and destructive emotion that must be rationalized and refined before it can be used positively. But then as now, when we await an official investigation into the reasons for and responses to October 7, it was difficult to contain. I cannot forgive the attitudes and approaches which led to such a disaster.

I use that description advisedly. There was complacency where there should have been coordinated contingency planning, coziness where there should have been wariness, indecisiveness where there should have been urgency. Basic protective principles and practices were either forgotten or ignored by those who should have known better.

Let's examine those basic principles. We have a saying in intelligence circles that you don't know what you don't know, so you have to know everything, or know that you don't know everything. Intelligence is a nation's first line of defense. Citizens walk the streets, buy their goods, do their work, organize their lives without consciously considering or understanding what we do, and they have a right to expect us to be effective bodyguards.

I have been involved in, and commanded, thousands of operations that will never be acknowledged. That is not false modesty. I am merely obeying the professional and political conventions of confidentiality. There are details I cannot reveal. It is, or certainly was, my job to protect others, usually when they were unaware of being protected. That involves trusting no one and nothing.

Imagine that someone gives you a lavishly wrapped present they say contains a bar of luxury chocolate. Are you sure? Can you trust your new friend? I'll take the present, open it, examine it, taste it, and still send it to the laboratory to prove it is, indeed, chocolate. What happens then is between you and your waistline.

As is so often the case, especially in an age where journalists, seized by false certainty, deal in exclamation points rather than question marks, there is a rush to be wise after the event. I do not believe this is something of which I can be accused, since I had, for almost a decade, been raising, at the highest level, my doubts about the quantity and quality of intelligence coming from Gaza.

Those doubts stemmed from my time as national security adviser, specifically during 2014's Operation Protective Edge, the fifty-one-day round of violence triggered by the kidnapping and murder of three teenage boys, and the IDF's intensive crackdown on terrorist infrastructure and personnel in the West Bank.

When Hamas retaliated with rocket fire from Gaza, we tried to warn them of the consequences, but they failed to respond. It was my initial experience of problems I raised at the time with Israeli principals and

commanders. We did not know enough about the crossing tunnels from Gaza into the state of Israel. We did not do enough to destroy those we found.

That poverty of intelligence was the principal reason that, on being nominated as Mossad director in 2016, I asked Prime Minister Netanyahu to be given responsibility for intelligence operations in Gaza. This was a challenge to the status quo, since the Mossad's work was traditionally restricted to the negation of Palestinian terrorism abroad.

When Bibi asked why, I avoided challenging the revision of history by the army and Shabak, Israel's internal security service, that they should have been permitted to crush Hamas instead of accepting the 2014 ceasefire. It would have been pointless political point scoring. Instead of concentrating on their failings, I based my argument on the gradual decline of reliable intelligence since disengagement from Gaza in 2005, an extremely brave but flawed initiative by the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

It was a one-sided deal. Twenty-one Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and four Israeli settlements in the West Bank were unilaterally dismantled, and Gaza effectively became a no-go zone for the IDF and Shabak. The gradual deterioration of intelligence sources became acute, because the units tasked with sustaining a flow of information were incapable of doing the job.

Bibi accepted my logic, that only the operational expertise of the Mossad could reverse the trend, but senior colleagues, in the army, in military intelligence, and in the Shabak, did not. They kicked me in the head: "It's ours. What do you know about it? It can never be your responsibility." Political realities killed the plan.

And here we are, not knowing enough about Hamas's plans.

In a fractured, self-protective culture there is a temptation to leak selectively to encourage praise or deflect blame, so as to cover the back of an individual or an institution. A flurry of reports highlighting unheeded warnings and other supposed failures to anticipate the gravity of the threat duly surfaced.

I've not seen the documentation alleged to be behind those reports—that is something that requires formal investigation—but I am sure of one thing. Our first line of defense, the flow of reliable intelligence, collapsed totally. The nation was vulnerable because no one had sufficient knowledge

of what was happening in Gaza, no matter how many documents are claimed to have been passed across Israeli desks. Whatever reports were read, they were translated wrongly. Very wrongly.

People were living happily less than a thousand meters from the border, cultivating their land, collecting their carrots and avocados, and cutting their flowers each morning. Their cows grazed contentedly and produced plentiful milk. It was a peaceful setting, but their faith that their lives would be protected was tragically misplaced.

I lived by a stark truth, as director of the Mossad. Ignorance and inaction were inexcusable. Knowledge is power. God forbid that I would not know what runners from a particular terrorist group were planning for our embassies abroad, or which missile programs were being developed. I needed to know the military and nuclear capabilities of our enemies.

There are three major factors in intelligence. One involves the method of collection, which includes physical evidence produced by human sources, cyberhacking, and visual surveillance. The second concerns how this information is assessed and analysed, and the third is dependent on human nature. That aspect is super important.

The human race is defined by differences in temperament, character, upbringing, and outlook. For every one of us who feels a little ill but carries on regardless, there is another who heads for the intensive-care unit. For every one of us who ignores a pimple on their back there is another who wants it checked out by a cancer specialist.

Why is that? Same story, different responses by different people. It comes down to the individual, and where national security is concerned, that can be perilous. In my world, if you do not like what you see, hear, or feel, you check it out.

To give a personal example, in 2016 I took the far-reaching decision to steal Iran's nuclear archive from Tehran. I will go into greater detail about the operation later in the book, but I had many doubters to convince and, with the help of a huge team headed by an elite group of Mossad operatives, many obstacles to overcome.

Lulled into a false sense of security by Iran's being a signatory to the so-called nuclear deal, people told me I had nothing to worry about. They saw very little risk, but I acted on gut instinct that something was wrong. I had very little hard evidence but sensed they were hiding something. I

didn't have a clue what that was, other than intelligence that suggested a strange sequence of events was underway.

I was bothered by indications that documentation and technical materials to do with the military aspects of Iran's nuclear program were being collected intensively. I did not know why or, specifically, what was being collected, but I gave orders that we had to bring it home. Thanks to the courage and resourcefulness of our men and women in the field we did so in 2018, after two years of meticulous preparation, and exposed Iran's lies about its peaceful intent to the world.

There is no eureka moment in intelligence. It doesn't happen that way. Instinct may say a particular piece of evidence is a game changer, but it is not that simple. You may have a significant intelligence lead, an intriguing visual contact, or even an urgent warning, where someone is telling you, "I'm worried about this, this, and this," but the information has to be consolidated.

That means throwing it into the blender, where, in times of conflict, commanders or senior officials make their own judgment calls, often from different perspectives. If you go back to the example of the Yom Kippur War, we saw almost everything that was happening in the buildup to the attack, but we convinced ourselves it was nothing, because a critical element, human intelligence, was ignored.

As far as October 7 was concerned, they probably failed to translate the limited intelligence they had in their possession until it was too late. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, there were intense internal discussions about supposed phone calls in the middle of the night between the head of Shabak and military commanders following reports of "disturbing" intelligence from the southern border.

They shared what they saw, but not much was done. Did those conversations happen, as rumor suggests? I don't know, but ultimately it is of secondary importance. The reality is that they did not raise the alarm. They might have had some information, but not nearly enough. There was a degree of complacency; in other words, the human factor led to—that word again—disaster.

In our professional life we cannot afford to live with doubt. Where there is a doubt, it must be confirmed or eradicated. Let's say there is a suspicion an operation may be in danger of turning sour. God forbid some of our operatives might be arrested, or worse. It may be a borderline case, a long

shot, but it must be checked and cross-checked so we have one-hundred-percent confidence in the security of the mission.

So, what do you do if there is even the slightest question mark over a possible attack? Don't assume everything will be okay. Go and investigate. You have your privileges, your driver, your secretary, your salary because the country trusts you to do your job, so do what you have to do. If you demonstrate the merest hint of complacency, you do not deserve the honor of your duty to protect your nation at all times and at all costs. You should not be in a position of influence and responsibility.

There are so many questions to answer. Did we know what was coming or didn't we? Did we know what weapons the enemy were holding? Did we know their missile capabilities? Did we know whether Iran's proxies would be supported by a nuclear threat? Did we know the extent of what a former Israeli chief of staff called Gaza's "metro," the thousand kilometers or so of tunnels beneath the enclave? Did we know the magnitude of those crossing tunnels, toward Israel?

What information did we collect? How reliable was it? How efficiently did we collect it? How well was it assessed? The Gaza Strip covers around 365 square kilometers. A big, complex place to control, but not unmanageable. We have a second, physical line of defense—our army. We know there is a quantifiable enemy on the other side of the border, forty to fifty thousand ruthless, brutal terrorists. They want to eradicate the state of Israel. It is a declared aim of Hamas, an article of faith.

That much we know for sure. So, if we know what they want to do, do we know how they intend to do it? Our borders are guarded according to the intelligence assessment, and that is where the weakness lies. We lived with doubt. I would have insisted on investigating the generals. Show me your sources of human intelligence. How many do you have? What did you know about them? Show me what you do, and I, as a senior intelligence officer, can assess it.

I am not asking them to do my job. I want them to do their job. It is all very well, these generals running around with their smart, powerful weapons, chasing terrorist elements in their armored vehicles, but their duty is to guard the lines. Why was the response to the threat patchy and time-consuming?

There is an element of human nature involved. These people do not have a proper understanding of their mission because they are so tightly

knit. They speak almost exclusively to one another. They cover for each other and mix socially. It is all too cozy. No one questions the system. A little modesty would not go amiss because their behavior suggests they think they know it all.

I made a conscious choice to have no close friendships within the Mossad. I had thousands of subordinates. Yes, I could have coffee with staff members, advise or even console them. But I could also shout at them, criticize their work, even fire them if necessary. There was no emotional contagion.

I want to make a clear distinction between the culture that failed to recognize the folly of welcoming families into military camps in the Southern Command, dangerously close to potential conflict zones, and the heroism many individuals showed on that terrible morning of October 7.

Many commanders and soldiers were on holiday at the time of the attack, another indication of a relaxed approach that explains the total collapse of the second line of defense. You are vulnerable if you assume no one will come and try to hit you. You need the imagination to feel a little fear of the unexpected, or the supposedly impossible. You do not have a choice if you are to fulfill your obligations—do everything possible to expect and prepare for the worst, in order to protect the state.

It is a daunting, onerous responsibility. During the war I fell into conversation with a former senior member of the Israeli intelligence community. “I don’t get it,” he said. “How come they were on vacation? How come? In my time I took only a single day off.” I couldn’t resist replying, “What, the whole day?” because when you have the sort of accountability I had, as head of the Mossad, you struggle to sleep and certainly never take a day’s holiday.

I was on the red phone for twenty-four hours a day and had to know what was going on. It was a form of sickness. I told my employees to write everything down. It was not enough to tell me things. I wanted to read their reports. Every Friday night after dinner, about 11:00 p.m. in the winter and from midnight in the summer, I would sit down with a huge pile of files and work my way through them. I wanted to know everything that moved within the Mossad.

By around 4:00 on Saturday morning I was satisfied. I knew I had an advantage over everyone else in the organization, because I had put in the work. I had taken out my insurance. I was able to challenge their

assessments, correct their conclusions, interrogate their intelligence. They knew they had to respond to me by Sunday night. Everything comes back to personal attitude, the human factor.

Diligence is a habit, and I spent a lot of time educating my staff about its critical importance. In return, I stressed that the buck stopped with me. I took complete responsibility, because I was the one who sent them out into the field. Though I expected them to make the best of their talents, and if they failed, out of stupidity or reluctance, I would come crashing down on them from a great height, I would take the blame.

I refused to spare myself in such circumstances because the outcome suggested I had obviously not trained them as well as I could have done. If my assessment of their capabilities proved to be damagingly flawed, again, it was down to me. I demand the highest standards, but don't believe blame should be spread downward. Accountability should accompany authority.

The resignation of the IDF chief of staff, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi, three days after the implementation of the Gaza ceasefire in January 2025, and that of Major General Yaron Finkelman, head of the Southern Command, was accompanied by an admission that they had failed to protect Israeli citizens. It was an honorable acceptance of the inevitable.

The removal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in November 2024 was relatively clean, in a political sense, but the prime minister's proposed sacking of Ronen Bar, the head of Shabak, our internal security service, because of his "ongoing distrust" in him, was legally messy and socially divisive.

The failures of October 7 were institutionalized—in the IDF, Shabak, and military intelligence. For a long time, the war effort in Gaza was led by the people who were culpable for those failures. There is simply no one else to blame. At least now we have closure and a new clarity and context to our efforts.

As I tell my kids and my subordinates, there is no substitute for the mirror test. Stand in front of it, naked, and tell yourself you are doing your job. You should never be capable of lying to yourself. I have many good friends in the army, but I cannot forgive them for not doing their job. I don't care if they like that or not, but something was badly wrong in their system.

What, then, makes a good intelligence officer? There are essentially three types. At the risk of restating the obvious, the first are the complacent ones, those who are a danger to themselves and those around them, and

must be weeded out. There are also what I call the alarmists, who tell you the enemy are coming in force imminently. If they don't come today, they will be here tonight or tomorrow. If they don't come then, they will show up the next day, or the day after that.

The third type, and the best ones, chart a middle course between a measured confidence in their intelligence assessment and a readiness to act quickly and decisively if required. They take pains to read the evidence effectively. They have no interest in covering their asses or flattering anyone higher up the food chain. They certainly won't be telling me on a daily basis that the enemy is coming. By valuing trust, they inspire trust.

I rationalized my responsibility for operations that involved risk to life for many years in the Mossad. It can be a heavy burden, knowing that, God forbid, operatives could be captured or killed. I insisted if things went wrong, and a mission failed, the liability was mine, and only mine. It was not the fault of those beneath me, in the organizational structure, or above me, in the political hierarchy.

I refused to hide behind prime ministerial approval of operations, to the point where I broke with the tradition of my predecessors and avoided rushing to Jerusalem for an audience before any difficult operational decision. My logic was clear: If the operation was successful, I would be happy for Bibi to share the credit with the people who did the job. He is the country's defender, its savior. If it was not a success, I accepted the consequences.

As director of the Mossad, I had an unwavering belief in the total independence of decision-making. Commanders' bravery is something we teach within the organization. By that, I mean taking absolute responsibility for the outcome of any judgment. That responsibility can be split, but it can never be avoided. The buck always stopped with me.

In that sense, sharing information about the nature of the operation, before it was undertaken, was of limited relevance. There was no law requiring me to do so, and, within reason, freedom of thought and action was a practical policy. Some other members of the establishment noticed, voicing their disapproval, but there was no kickback from my ultimate boss.

An understanding was reached, and our relationship was maintained. But, as darkness began to descend on the evening of October 8, as the toxic fog of war swirled and a nation sought guidance and reassurance, I was no

longer in office, and that relationship with the prime minister had to be renewed.

Chapter 2

An Opportunity Missed

Dealing with a prime minister is business, not personal, however many moments of high tension you share, or how many times you help to shape national destiny. You are serving the office, rather than the individual, no matter how intimate and important the relationship seems to the outside world.

As director of the Mossad, I was a servant of the state. Similarly, in my two and a half years as national security adviser, I offered counsel to Bibi Netanyahu and the cabinet, but my loyalty was to the nation, and my work was dictated by the magnitude of his position, rather than any personal friendship. The difference in tone is subtle but significant.

I was his subordinate, but I had his trust, just as he had my respect for his reputation as a ruthlessly pragmatic politician. I agreed to extend my time leading the Mossad, only resigning as director twelve days before Naftali Bennett established his administration in June 2021.

I was flattered when Bibi subsequently offered me the job of defense minister, in the government he formed following the 2022 election, but rejected the initiative because I wanted to create a sense of distance from the political process, and I was eager to learn new skills in a commercial environment. The business world was intellectually stimulating, fast-moving and, I have to admit, financially rewarding. I enjoyed the mental agility required in making successful investments.

That did not mean the relationship with Bibi was fractured. He would call me from time to time, seeking my informal perspective on certain issues. October 7 obviously transformed the dynamics. I felt compelled to volunteer my services instantly when I heard of the invasion, and met him and a small team of advisers some thirty-six hours later.

The mood was understandably strained, since the scale and speed of events were profoundly disturbing. The threat of a multifront conflict preyed on many minds. The shock and rage that seized the nation, as horrific details of the previous day's carnage began to emerge, was reminiscent of the US, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

The prime minister was joined by Avi Gil, his military secretary, Tzachi Hanegbi, his national security adviser, Ron Dermer, strategic affairs minister, and Professor Jacob Nagel, who acted as interim national security adviser for a year after I left the role to return to lead the Mossad.

Bibi was impatient, and obviously under great pressure. He had spoken of vengeance and the prospect of a long, hard war in a nationwide address, promising to "cripple Hamas to the point of destruction." Referring to the hostages, he reassured the country that "Israel will come to account with anyone who harms one hair of their head." The launch of a full-scale invasion of Gaza appeared to be imminent.

My plan, to be adopted before that intensification occurred, was the development of a humanitarian corridor, designed to funnel a million Palestinian civilians from the Strip into an impermanent settlement, overseen by the Egyptians, in the Sinai Peninsula. Such a large-scale evacuation would help to answer the inevitable accusations, by the anti-Israel lobby, that we were culpable in prompting a humanitarian crisis.

In practical terms, I needed written confirmation of my status as an Israeli government envoy, to add weight to my existing contacts within the region. Given the obvious sensitivities, I outlined how I would seek to engage both regional and international leaders on a necessarily discreet basis.

I also stated what I took to be increasingly obvious, by reminding the PM of my previous advice to personally assess the intelligence. He needed to trust his judgment, since he lacked reliable information, free from distortion. He needed to be wary of the self-serving nature of any advice given by military commanders and other officers from the IDF and Shabak who were already complicit in the calamity.

I sensed little humility there. There were the same perceptions, the same reluctance to address realities. There was a familiar ignorance and lack of modesty. The army hierarchy always claim they are ready. Some figures in the defense establishment were even arguing for the immediate opening of a second front, against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Really, gentlemen? I don't think so. This, remember, was at a time when there were Hamas terrorists on Israeli soil still being rooted out. In those circumstances, when no one knows the magnitude of the military challenge that awaits, it is madness to effectively launch a second major war because generals believe their own PR.

Without wishing in any way to underplay the valor and fortitude of our troops, in what we have always cherished as a people's army, the IDF's big reputation in battle belies its relatively small size. The logistical difficulties that were soon to surface offered a more sobering perspective.

Above all, I argued, Bibi had no need to rush, despite the obvious temptation of inflamed emotions. Thrown onto a war footing, Israel was about to recruit three hundred fifty thousand reservists, a huge number at any one time. The majority, like my family members, were in their thirties and had already done national service.

It had been quite a few years since they were in uniform and had used a rifle. They were by no means soft, but might have put on a kilogram or two. So, before taking them from their offices and other workplaces, in the cities and the countryside, thought needed to be given to how long it would take to chip away at the inevitable rustiness caused by a return to civilian life.

Bibi accepted the logic of my arguments and the merits of my plan. Turning to his team, he said, "What Yossi says here is very valuable. It is a very serious offer." He sought reassurance that I could deliver on the principles and practicalities of the proposal. Once that was received, he gave the go ahead.

Arrangements were made to secure an endorsement, and inform other cabinet ministers. Since the proposal involved me stepping back, partially at least, into the environment overseen by the Mossad, the national security adviser promised to talk to David Barnea to see if my involvement met with his approval.

Once that was secured, and I had my authority in writing from the NSA, I set off on my mission. It was not without its political diversions, since early the following month I had to pressure Bibi to row back on a misleading impression that I was acting outside the proper channels. I was furious, since it challenged my integrity and undermined my authority.

Once I reproduced texts from his national security adviser, confirming our arrangements, his office quickly reassured journalists that I had initiated contact with an unnamed Arab leader with the PM's approval. The revised

statement added that I had also held a number of meetings “on a diplomatic issue” and remained in contact with the NSA.

Contrary to inaccurate assumptions, I never took part in hostage negotiations. I kept to my brief, shuttling stealthily between capitals in the Middle East, and seeking support for the corridor, which I felt had the potential to be an invaluable pressure valve.

Through my previous work, on the Abraham Accords peace treaties and in the exploration of normalization agreements, I had come to value the wisdom of such leaders as Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s crown prince and prime minister; Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE; Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, emir of Qatar; and King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of Jordan. Each was engaged in a delicate balancing act addressing national, regional, and global audiences on that Sunday, when, in a public statement, King Abdullah urged an intensification of diplomatic efforts to avoid what he called the “dangerous repercussions” of any escalation in the conflict.

The support of one particular regional leader was so firm he lobbied strongly on my behalf with his peers, but it was clear that the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was preoccupied by the potential fallout. His closest adviser, Abbas Kamal, a hugely capable individual who ran the Egyptian general intelligence directorate until he moved to a wider role, coordinating the security apparatus in October 2024, explained they understood the principles of the proposal, but were fearful of public opinion.

I met President El-Sisi many times, yet the destabilizing effect of the proposed settlement becoming permanent was an insurmountable obstacle. The message I received from across the region was that they didn’t trust Israel to deliver the stability required to make the initiative temporary.

Following that reasoning, rather than accepting it, I offered to bring guarantees from the international community that the plan would not become an enduring arrangement. I offered to take my case to, among others, the US, UK, Japan, China, and India, but it proved to be fruitless. Ultimately President El-Sisi rejected the initiative.

During that process I went to Qatar to discuss potential solutions with Sheik Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, the prime minister. He has been operating in the field of foreign affairs as diplomat,

economist and politician for many years, and is an astute, far-sighted observer.

I was aware of others suggesting I should assume responsibility for leading negotiations to free the hostages and, in truth, I was ready to do so. However, when I offered my services, they were rejected. I do not know the reasons for that, and it seemed counterproductive to pursue answers.

I rationalized that the nation had far greater things to worry about than careless assumptions about who was doing what, and after several weeks I was eventually, for all intents and purposes, sacked as an intermediary. The war in Gaza had intensified and my concerns, about our strategic and operational approach, had deepened.

Uplifting images of thousands of exiles, returning to Israel to fight for the Jewish state, could not deflect from the difficulties. It takes time to recruit, train and equip a fighting force. Critical shortages of equipment were only met by the generosity of Jewish communities in Israel and abroad, and by several NGOs.

I personally purchased helmets, vests, and other military kit for the troops. This has been an ongoing commitment on my part; later in the conflict progress was stalled by a lack of armaments and ammunition.

Gaza, six times the size of Manhattan and one of the most densely populated territories in the world, is the setting for a military nightmare. Any ground fighting must be staged building to building, door to door. It is a claustrophobic man trap in which conventional dividing lines, between combatants and civilians, have been rendered redundant.

Schools, hospitals, places of worship and other civic lifelines have been infiltrated by Hamas, to the point where their own people are exploited as powerless, tragically vulnerable terrorist assets. Unlike in past conflicts, where Israel fought skirmishes and set piece battles in the desert, it is impossible to fight a proper war when captive civilians are callously placed in harm's way.

As part of the so-called disengagement deal in 2005, we destroyed all synagogues, Jewish housing and agriculture in Gaza. We even took our dead out of their graves, so the Palestinians could not claim they were being disturbed by Jewish spirits. They had a unique opportunity to recast their lives, follow their beliefs, and secure their future.

What happened? Instead of exploiting natural resources, turning the Strip into a kind of heaven, building a seven-star Four Seasons hotel or an

Intercontinental Gaza City on the coastline, or marketing Club Med Khan Yunis to the world, they invented a new circle of hell, with tunnels, terrorism, and destruction. Do we really have to be blamed for that?

I realize that is a rhetorical question. In our part of the world it is a misconception to expect the victors always to write the history of any conflict. Somehow we are destined always to be forced on to the back foot. The international community sees the region through Palestinian eyes.

The debate is poisoned by disinformation, and slanted toward the Palestinian cause. They, and their unseen, unacknowledged allies in cyberspace, know how to press the right buttons. They have an innate understanding of the Western media, and are particularly skilled at reaching the US audience.

Time magazine reported that for every pro-Israeli video on TikTok, a far more influential medium than traditional news sites, there were fifty-four carrying the #freepalestine hashtag. Casualty figures issued by Hamas-affiliated organizations are accepted categorically, without dispute, despite recurring evidence they are distorted.

We, in Israel, need to be better at presenting facts and delivering powerful arguments. The conventional system isn't working. We lack the institutional mechanism to challenge false narratives that shape global public opinion; remarkably, in this day and age, there was no specific communications unit to do this at the outbreak of war.

At a time of crisis for a country, its leader has the responsibility of explaining the nation's actions to both an internal and external audience. This requires the assistance of a special group to amplify the messaging, and counter misconceptions. It is a messy but important part of the art of war. It also requires a human touch.

It does not help that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ministers are poor at communication. Bibi has never built an empathetic relationship with the Israeli people; he answers questions at set piece press conferences and leaves without giving the impression he is speaking to his fellow citizens.

He has rarely met expectations by sitting down with grieving relatives in the way I have, as president of the Friends of IDF Widows and Orphans Organization. Hebrew is a limited language in one respect: We don't have many words for apologizing, and it seemed like Bibi was saying sorry for the casualties without taking any responsibility for the actions that led to

them. That may be unfair, but, as we have come to accept, perception is invariably more powerful than reality.

We have had to become resigned to a litany of recurring external political demands. Finish the war, say our critics. Sign a deal. Withdraw from Gaza. Withdraw from Lebanon. Implement UN Resolution 1701, which dates back to August 11, 2006, and ignores the realities of Hezbollah rockets, primed and ready to be launched at Tel Aviv.

Too many innocent lives have been lost on both sides, but I will dispute, until my last breath, accusations of Israeli genocide. The enemy are brutal aggressors, to the point of inhumanity. Images of terrorist atrocities on October 7 are irreversibly etched on my brain, as they are on those of anyone who has seen their videos of torture, mass rape, mutilation, beheading, and the burning of children.

We must not desecrate the dignity and memory of the victims, but we cannot look away or shy away from the perpetrators' testimony. I am haunted by a father and son, captured in a sweep of Hamas invaders, recounting their own barbarism with a perverse form of pride. Each took turns in raping their victim before murdering her, as if it were some sort of debauched bonding session. It was an example of evil beyond comprehension.

In their minds, they were following out the orders of Mohammed Deif, who soon after the invasion was launched called on Palestinians to "carry out attacks on the settlements with all the means and tools at your disposal. Bring out your guns today, and whoever does not have a gun, let him bring out a knife, a cleaver, or an ax. Ignite the ground under the feet of the occupation."

Deif, head of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, had been known in Israel as the cat with nine lives because of his evasive powers. He did not live to enjoy a tenth. Despite the group's denials, he did not survive an airstrike that used eight two-thousand-pound bombs on July 13, 2024. The world is a better place for his departure.

The degradation of the terrorists' command structure is one of the great successes of the war, though unfortunately Khaled Mashal has remained out of reach in exile. He was a formative figure in the development of Hamas, head of its politburo for thirteen years until 2017. He was last seen in Doha in 2023, but was indicted by the US Department of Justice for allegedly orchestrating the October 7 attacks.

Soon after he gave an interview (actually, more a series of prompts to make a series of propaganda points) in which he was asked about a two-state solution. His reply revealed the narrowness of their ideology, since he used the Arab word *marfud*, which directly translated means "unacceptable" or "refused":

I hear people talking about a vision of a two-state solution, as something on the horizon. Let me tell you something about that. No way. Number one, we are not part of it. We do not accept the two-state solution because it means that we accept the existence of the state of Israel, and we can't do that.

We can't accept the Zionist state. Israel is my enemy. This is the mark of Hamas. We're asking for a total freedom from the occupation of the entire country. From the river to the sea, from the north to the south. In no way can we accept the '67 borders. This is only one fifth of our country. The country is everything.

As I remarked, on buying an original map of Israel as a present recently, both nations, Israel and Palestine, are using the same symbols of statehood. I'm not sure we will ever be in a position to explain that anymore, because the wider world doesn't really grasp what we are dealing with.

Even the most eminent diplomats have difficulty coming to terms with the contradictions of their position. I had an enlightening conversation with a British ambassador, who asked, "What is your business in Gaza?" I replied by asking him to justify a war against Argentina in the Falklands, sixteen thousand kilometers away from Windsor Castle. "It's ours," he exclaimed.

"Well, Mr. Ambassador," I countered, "okay, Gaza is not ours, but it is on our borders, and Israelis are willing to die for that."

It is in many ways a lost challenge. The person on the street blames Israel for the mess. Ask the average pro-Palestinian protester on an American university campus or a European street to tell you which sea, and which river, they are chanting about, and they couldn't identify them. The bottom line is that the state of Israel has totally failed in explaining its right to exist. It all starts there. Western leaders talk about de-escalation, but you can only have peace with people who are prepared to accept your existence.

The difference would be transformative. This requires discussion in greater depth, but what do we have to do on the Israeli side to produce the conditions in which the Gazan people can lead better lives from now on? Four decisive factors emerge: the establishment of a total demilitarized zone, a civil authority that will oversee the enclave, the acceptance of the state of Israel's existence, and the abandonment of terrorism.

I try, in my own small way, to redress the balance through a presentation I give in Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English. It is initially illustrated by a map of the original UN partition plan, Resolution 181, which was passed on November 29, 1947, following months of committee-driven negotiations in which Jewish groups participated but Arab organizations did not.

The plan, to be put into operation on May 14, 1948, allotted the Arab state 11,592 square kilometres, or 42.88 percent of the British Palestine Mandate's territory, and the Jewish state 15,264 square kilometres, or 56.47 percent. The remaining 176 square kilometers, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the surrounding area, would become an international zone.

Almost immediately, local units of the Arab Liberation Army launched attacks on Jewish cities and settlements. The so-called independence war of 1947–1948 had begun. The head of the Arab League warned of "a war of extermination." Despite the Mandate, the British didn't intervene forcefully, since they seemed preoccupied with wrapping their flags up to take them home. In other words, we were at war six months before we even had a country.

Five Arab nations invaded immediately. Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. Tel Aviv came under air attack that night. We were forced to fight for what we had been promised, even though it was far from the promised land, since who but God Himself could divide what He had decreed was ours?

Coming from a religious Jewish family, with an Orthodox education, I appreciate that a significant proportion of the Israeli population would say, "We can't give you a piece of our land, because it is His. It is against God's will. This is non-negotiable. We will simply settle here." Nevertheless David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father, agreed to those borders and accepted that the partition plan was viable. Let us make the most of our land. Our new Arab neighbors did not accept that.

The likes of Khaled Mashal perpetuate the poison, so that we have had repetitive rounds of violence incorporating the Intifadas and intensifying since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. My presentation is illustrated by rockets being intercepted over Tel Aviv.

Yet all the while thousands of Palestinians and hundreds of trucks are coming in and out of Israel. Gas, water, and electricity are being supplied. And, of course, we have the charitable donations that result in a lot of aid, and a lot of money, being diverted away from intended recipients.

That brings us to October 7. The Hamas leadership had nothing to gain from an invasion on such a scale. It was a big, unavoidably fatal mistake. I have said this many times to intermediaries over the years: What do you think we will do if they shoot rockets at the state of Israel? Pack our bags and head back to Warsaw? We have nowhere to go. This is the only country we have, and we intend to keep it for ourselves.

My suspicion is that even Hamas was surprised at its success on that awful day. I'm sure a satisfactory scenario for Yahya Al-Sinwar, as he planned the attacks with Deif, was the propaganda triumph of taking ten or so hostages, as negotiation tools for Palestinian prisoners. Our two lines of defense, our intelligence and our army guarding the border, collapsed to such an extent he had too great a success. Our response was always going to be as savage as our failure.

To a degree, history was repeating itself. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who was fated to pay the ultimate price for the fallout from October 7 when he died in an Israeli Air Force strike on the group's headquarters in the Beirut suburb of Dahieh, discovered something similar in 2006, when he ordered the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers.

This led to the second Lebanon war, in which huge damage was inflicted on the largely Shiite southern parts of Beirut, controlled by Hezbollah. Nasrallah came under intense criticism from Arab neighbors, and from internal detractors like Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who accused him of being "willing to let the Lebanese capital burn while he haggles over terms of surrender."

Nasrallah admitted his mistakes in a TV interview soon after the end of the thirty-four-day conflict: "We do not think, even one percent, that the capture led to a war at this time and of this magnitude. I'm convinced and sure that this war was planned and that the capture of these hostages was just their excuse to start their preplanned war, but if I had known that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not."

It is only natural to wonder how the region may have evolved had Israel completed the job, and effectively eradicated Hezbollah, all those years ago. Yet Iran's influence remains pernicious, and Israeli lives are being lost on Lebanese soil, just as they were when I was literally blooded in the so-called First Lebanon War in 1982.

Chapter 3

Bloodlines

Without Divine assistance the state of Israel would not have come into being. That was true then and is still true today."

I spoke those words, and aligned myself to their spirit, in the synagogue I helped to build in Modi'in. As the first Mossad director from a religious background, it was a symbolic reaffirmation of faith.

Faith and family are the twin pillars of Israeli society, and of my own life. We care about who we are, where we came from, and why we are here, after two thousand years of exile ended by the Holocaust. We are here for a reason, to build and protect our nation.

Unlike others I don't believe in miracles. What I do believe, in referring to "Divine intervention," is the idea of serving something bigger than ourselves. There is a cause to which we are wedded, a fundamental reason to fight for our own.

That's the loftiest of aims, a deeply personal, primary source of motivation for everything I have done. We are here, or I am here, not only to defend the state of Israel from being annihilated, or to suffer from wars or terrorism, but also to protect the Jewish people in its entirety.

I have dedicated my life to that principle. By the age of eighteen I was in the army, volunteering for an operational unit, and then fighting as a commander in the Lebanon war of 1982. Within four years, I had been approached by and accepted into the Mossad.

My passion to learn from history, my devotion to the overarching mission of ensuring the homeland continues to exist, explains why I was so easy to recruit. My kind of work has to be established on very strong Zionist or Israeli foundations, because you sacrifice so much.

You hardly have an identity which is yours. You're never there for your wife, kids, parents, friends. You lose part of your life, not physically, thank God, but you miss life events, births, and subsequent birthdays. I've missed almost all of my good friends' weddings. I was always away, trying to compensate with a quick phone call to say "mazel tov."

I'm not complaining. It's a lot to sacrifice, but this is a higher cause. I'm fascinated by the human condition, the formative forces of history and philosophy. Our world has been revolutionized by technology, but people are still essentially the same.

Read the philosophers, from 2,600 years ago, and the themes are familiar. What is a nation? Elections. Democracy, dictatorship. Aristocrats and the common man. Wars, territories, geography, myths. The gods.

Seek perspective.

A world leader recently sent me a graphic that illustrated disappearing empires. The Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. Where have they gone? Caesar, sitting above his senate members, saying we rule the world. A fragment of history, even though it spanned close to one thousand years.

It is a kind of miracle we have survived as a people, absorbing different cultures and traveling the world through Africa, Asia, up to China, across to Europe. We've been transplanted to North America and throughout Latin America too. Then, in 1948, there is this beautiful creation, the state of Israel.

I was born when modern Israel was thirteen years of age, a young nation celebrating its bar mitzvah. Jerusalem, my birthplace, was divided between Jordan and Israel. I was brought up in Katamon, an ultraOrthodox community, a quiet child in a world of simmering tension and hidden rivalries.

Much is made in our communities of our *yichus*, our ancestral bloodlines, or lineages. I am a ninth-generation Israeli-born Jew on my mother's side, and seventh generation on my father's side. My lineage is also Eastern European, with roots going back to Minsk and Lubavitch, the Hasidic dynasty.

My paternal great-great-great-grandfather, Rav Oizlander, was a *dayan*, a judge in a Jewish religious court, whose advice on religious questions was often sought by rabbis. He emigrated to Israel with his two daughters, one of whom married a young student of Talmudic law and had a son.

Chaim Yisrael Halperin was a builder, the founder of a well-known matzah bakery. He was most proud, however, of his role as the chief mohel, a person who performs ritual circumcision, in Jerusalem.

He had six children. His middle daughter, one of four, was my grandmother. My grandfather, Yosef Cohen, a fish merchant, passed down his religious and Zionist beliefs to my father, Ayreh, who left a teaching seminary to join the Irgun, the pre-independence underground fighting force.

They were described as a terrorist organization by the United Nations but regarded as heroes by ordinary Israelis. Those who know my father in later life, as a kindhearted retired senior banker, may not immediately recognize the younger man who, as a courier, running between the bullets in a guerrilla war, was fortunate to survive.

My mother Mina's great-grandmother, Alte, was born to parents who had lost all their other children in infancy. On the advice of their rabbi, they gave her up for adoption to a local family, who emigrated to Israel. She, in turn, married into one of the most distinguished families in Jerusalem, the Werkers, and had a son, Yechiel.

He bought a printing press and built a business that supported the extended family. I identify some of my traits in his son, Joshua, my grandfather. He loved books and passed on his thirst for knowledge to my mother, who admits that "learning and teaching have always been my life's purpose." The house hummed with intellectual conversation.

Joshua was a man of firm beliefs and quiet courage. In the war of independence, in 1948, he used his deceptively innocent rabbinic appearance to smuggle grenades and ammunition under his suit into Jerusalem's Old City. He became the commander of the city's religious military unit.

He supported Haganah, the main Zionist paramilitary group, but was kidnapped by them, on suspicion of plotting against them and of helping the hated British administration. The distrust was apparently created by the family printing business, regardless of the fact that it secretly produced posters on behalf of the resistance. He was held captive for several weeks and badly beaten before being released.

Though these stories emerge, dusty and dated, from family folklore, they helped inform my world and shaped my outlook. I have an innate understanding that an inner Israeli conflict is intolerable. We cannot be

conflicted from within. The memory of such damaging division influenced my life because I am committed to working for the nation as a whole rather than being partisan, divisive, and indulging in local fights.

My father also had his internecine dramas and remained loosely involved with his old Irgun colleagues as a reserve officer in the prototype Israeli Defense Forces. To me, at the age of ninety-four, he is a kind of survivor. He is a devout, compassionate man who received a medal from the president of Israel in August 2022, in recognition of fifty years of service as a volunteer in the community, with hospitals and NGOs.

As he has grown older, he has become more emotional about his childhood. His mother, the grandmother I was fated never to meet, died when he was three years old. A brother also died young. That was how it was, but the memories still haunt him.

My first call, on returning home, is always to my parents. During one recent chat, almost out of nowhere, he told me, "You know, it is not easy to live without a mother." Ninety years melted away in that moment. He was no longer the respected benefactor who rose to become deputy CEO of a major bank. He was a three-year-old boy, fearful and trapped in perpetual mourning.

I'm named after his father, who passed away three months before I was born. I'm proud of my father, and of the values he cherishes. He is so honest, the straightest arrow of a man I have ever met. He couldn't cheat, even if he wanted to.

One of my earliest memories is of sitting on the stairs at home in Jerusalem, half a floor away from my aunt and uncle. I could not have been much more than two years old. Our home was modest, but full of books. That's down to my mother. When my father purchased an early television set, she sent it back to the shop. We were expected to read, to feed our imagination, rather than watch idly. Even when she relented partially, the TV was locked, out of reach unless she gave permission to watch. It wasn't the greatest hardship, to be honest; the only concession to children, in scheduling that only lasted four and a half hours a day, was a thirty-minute debate.

Mum has several degrees and is a counselor and educator who does volunteer work with the poor and with troubled youngsters. She was principal of a religious girls' school before studying for four years to become a lawyer in a religious court.

She tells me that I behave like her, but I can't agree, because she is an extreme version of a Yiddish mum. She worries continually. I love both my parents dearly and unequivocally, of course, but I sometimes think I was kidnapped and dropped into the family by the proverbial stork. I am different.

I do, however, embody family values. I believe in the four pillars: Am Yisrael, the People of Israel; Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel; Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, and Torat Yisrael, a fundamental notion that it is sinful to sit by when Jewish life is in danger, the Torah is being defiled, and the land of Israel is being threatened.

It reflects the broadness of the Mossad's charter, which defines its purpose as "secret collection of information (strategic, political, operational) outside the country's borders; carrying out special operations outside those borders; thwarting the development and acquisition of unconventional weapons by hostile states; prevention of terror attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets outside Israel; development and maintenance of political ties with countries that do not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel; bringing to Israel Jews from countries that refused to allow them to leave, and creating frameworks for the defense of the Jews still in those countries."

My early years were unsettled. During the '67 war, our building often came under random fire. We lived at an intersection. One road was named after Eli Cohen (no relation), the Mossad agent who was exposed and publicly executed in Damascus in 1965, aged forty.

One of my most sacred duties as Mossad director was to return his wristwatch, worn in Syria, to his family. As I said on the day: "We remember Eli Cohen and do not forget. His heritage, of dedication, determination, courage, and love of the homeland, is our heritage. We remember and have maintained a close connection over the years with his family, Nadia and the children."

The other route, leading into our crossroads, was eventually named after Lieutenant Colonel Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu, Benjamin's elder brother who was killed when leading the elite commando unit that rescued 102 Israeli hostages at Entebbe Airport in July 1976.

Yonatan had served in the Six-Day War in 1967, when East Jerusalem was taken, and the great shrines of the Old City were finally open to us. We lived close by. Just hours after the battle my father took the family, through

the smoke and past the pockmarked buildings, to the Western Wall, the holiest place for Jews.

He captured the moment, our amazement and excitement, with a Super 8 movie camera. I was only six, but the importance of the occasion remains imprinted on my brain. I might have laughed at Dad, swooping among us like a frustrated film director, but I felt a sense of belonging to my tribe.

I was never a shy kid, but I was a natural people watcher. The man I would become was waiting in the wings.

I left high school after a year to attend Yeshivat Or Etzion, a religious school where I became a talmid, a disciple, of Rav Haim Drukman. I was close to him, as the most senior spiritual leader of the Religious Zionist community, until his death, aged ninety, on December 25, 2022.

My faith has provided educational and ethical continuity throughout my life. The rigor of religious study, the discipline and intellectual dexterity required to debate key points of learning all honed my character.

Unlike religious schools, secular schools in Israel do not teach you how to learn by questioning or debate. You have a text and read it without challenge, without discussion. In math, chemistry, or physics, you solve equations without delving deeper into the wider relevance of the subject. There's too little context. In my religious school, from the age of eight or nine I was obliged to argue my case, defend my position. I deciphered and debated the Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology. It was written in a different language, Aramaic, which originated in ancient Babylon, rather than in Hebrew.

I'm intrigued by the process of understanding who we are, and what we do. I don't do things automatically or without thought. I ask questions, so I can appreciate our natural talents and assets, and work out where we are going. Some of those questions are directed at myself: Who am I? Why am I doing what I am doing? What is important? What is not? Why is it important to be Jewish? The answers are not comfortable or categoric.

Judaism within a Jewish state should exist forever. I'm not sure what forever means or is, but things are deteriorating. Too many Israelis don't know who they are. They have no clue. They are less and less interested in what is happening, or what has happened.

Most wars are unnecessary. Someone has decided against the other guy, and we, in organizations like the Mossad, are expected to be superheroes, to

protect people from such aggression. Is aggression a human need? Of course, it is not. What is it, then? A reflex action?

I have thought in layers since the age of eight. I'm still the boy who sat back and slipped on a mask that no one saw through. I was perceived as a prodigy, destined to become an important rabbi or spiritual leader, but I had already decided that the closed, conservative world was not for me.

Superficially, I was a normal kid. I was very happy. I had my bicycle, my basketball, my treats. I had many friends. I joined Bnei Akiva, the Jewish religious youth movement, that currently has 125,000 members in forty-two countries. I was at ease in the classroom.

Yet, despite everything I owed to the disciplines of being immersed in a religious culture, and my personal growth, to use a fashionable phrase, I yearned to experience the relative freedom of the secular world.

You don't wake up in the morning and think, *I've got to be religious today*. It sets the rhythm of your day. It is your life, a way of being. But, bit by bit, I decided to disguise the fact that I was becoming alienated by it. No one knew. The facade was firm. Appearances were deceptive.

Increasingly, I resented following the rules as they were dictated to me. Perhaps subconsciously, I was already working undercover. I hid my secular books, worked out multifaceted ways in which I could live what amounted to a double life.

I developed alibis to excuse my absences and explain where I was. I went to places where I was forbidden to go. I wasn't in the synagogue when they wanted me, so I had to come up with a cover story. When I didn't attend prayers, I had to be ready with a plausible excuse.

The charade felt comfortable. I wasn't necessarily proud of my powers of deception, but they didn't challenge my conscience. If you can act, you can act. I had to do so to survive the scrutiny of others who felt responsible for my spiritual health.

That chameleon quality has stayed with me. It has led from my personal life into my professional life.

I didn't want to be defined as a yeshiva boy, poring over the scriptures. I was naturally observant, and quickly realized I had an ability to relate to other people. It was a little like cleaning a dirty window with a fresh cloth. There was the odd smear, but sunlight flooded in.

I found I had an intuitive sense of someone's personality and motivation. I learned to bond with others, effortlessly and instinctively. I

read the room, picked up on body language. I gravitated to the center of the group.

I gathered trust without really seeking it and I recognized the dynamics of conflict. Before too long, whenever there was a dispute between friends, or two groups, I was being asked to be the arbitrator.

The attraction of the secular world was, in many ways, simple to rationalize. It was easier. As a religious child, you do a lot more. You wake up hours earlier than all the other kids in the neighborhood because by six o'clock you have to be at the synagogue, praying.

You have to wake up in a certain way. You have to wash your hands in a certain way. You have to tie your shoes in a special way. Orthodox Judaism seeps into every nook and cranny of your life because it dictates your actions.

Even before getting out of bed, you are expected to show gratitude by reciting the prayer, called Modeh Ani: "I thank Thee, O living and eternal King, because Thou hast graciously restored my soul to me; great is Thy faithfulness."

Each hand must be washed three times, alternately: right, left, right, left, right, left. Before that, it is forbidden to touch your clothes, food, mouth, nose, eyes, ears, and anus. You are also not allowed to walk four cubits until you have been cleansed (a cubit is anywhere between eighteen and twenty-two inches, depending on the source).

Everything is structured. You put on the right shoe first, without lacing it. Then you put on the left shoe and lace it before lacing the right shoe. You are expected to say at least one hundred benedictions daily.

After the synagogue, at 7:00 a.m., you can go and have your breakfast. Classes begin at 8:00 a.m. I was in a boarding school and allowed home for the weekend once every three weeks. It felt worse than being in the army at times.

But there is a twist, a catch, a contradiction. There often is in my line of business. Despite my adolescent defiance, it was not until I was twenty-six, when I was a Mossad operative, that I finally took my yarmulke, my skullcap, off. It takes time to openly go against family principles. There is a latent sense of guilt, a nagging sense that somehow you have disrespected those you hold dear.

At around that time I had a discussion with my wife and soulmate, Aya, who is now head nurse in the Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem.

She is similar to me, in that she has an implacable belief in what she does.

We were at a domestic crossroads. I was making my name as an operator. She told me that she had married a religious boy. I was not religious in practice, but I was and still am a great believer. What were we to do? How would we bring up our children? Would we give them a religious education or a conventional, secular Israeli education?

How would we treat our house? Would we observe Shabbat, the Sabbath, and keep it kosher? We decided we would do so and are very happy we did. I literally work around my faith.

I still question myself a lot, but on another level I question the world itself.

Modernity has brought frivolity. Instead of dealing with existential issues, like climate change, people are obsessed by their WhatsApp group, or their cars. They may be nice to have, up to a point, but they are not a must have.

So, what is important? Technology, social networks? Are they really an asset? Do we really need ritual stupidity on Instagram or TikTok? Is happiness really the response of your friends if you post a photograph of your meal or your holiday home?

At the risk of stating the obvious, I don't think so.

I dislike cynical people. I prefer open discussion, but it does upset me when I'm asked to rationalize why a soldier or an operative should risk his or her life for an ideal. Values are important, particularly in this day and age.

The world is facing a crisis of leadership. If the current global political elite were in place in 1942 or 1943, we would still have Hitler, or more accurately his ideological descendants, running Germany, and the world.

Why isn't it working? Because conglomerates, commercial companies, societies, and technological organizations are probably stronger than their governments. They have better leadership, higher quality people in senior positions, than the political classes.

In the not so recent past in Israel, you were extremely dependent on the government. It decided, directly or indirectly, the type of job you had. Today it is not as important. The market is healthy; privatization works because companies do things better.

There is a huge gap between what we have, and what we need.

Thankfully the new generation has moral integrity. My kids are definitely more equality driven than we were. It is yet another reminder of the pivotal position of the family in a thoughtful, responsible society.

Aya and I have four children. Each in their own way is special. My son Yehonatan was born with cerebral palsy. He has unimaginable tenacity and an unshakeable will. He can't walk, can't read as he is legally blind, but was a multilingual honors student at school, and served in Unit 8200, the IDF intelligence corps, for several years.

Meir Dagan, my most influential tutor in his time as Mossad director, paid him the ultimate compliment of having a photograph of Yehonatan on his office wall, to remind him of the power of resilience.

I still well up when I remember his dignity and defiance, at his bar mitzvah, which we held in Vienna. It was a uniquely powerful rite of passage. When it came to the central part of the service, the Aliyah, when he is called to the bimah, the raised platform where the Torah is read, my brother Chaim and I came forward, with the intention of carrying him forward in his wheelchair.

Quietly, and with a fierce determination, he refused to cooperate. Instead, he raised himself painstakingly and, with Chaim and me on each side, forced himself into a standing position in front of the sefer Torah, the scroll on which the Book of Law is handwritten.

He had learned the reading by heart and delivered it word perfectly, as to be expected of someone who had come second in a global speaking competition, held in a ten-thousand-seat basketball arena in Tel Aviv, at the age of eleven.

I was humbled and felt honored to be his father. He is thirty-eight now, a smart, beautiful, if aging, boy, currently doing his second master's degree. He is not happy, not satisfied with his lot. How can he be expected to be? That is something that kills me, on a daily basis.

I have known, served with, and commanded some unbelievably brave men and women, but I stand by what I said to the press when I was presented as the new head of the Mossad:

"Yehonatan is the real hero."

Chapter 4

Death Has No Dominion

Contrary to urban myth, you are not approached at a bar by a femme fatale, leaving vapor trails of Chanel No. 5, or accosted on a fog-shrouded street by a swivel-eyed man in an overcoat who whispers an offer you cannot refuse. All it takes, to begin a career as a spy, is a simple phone call.

In 1983, I was three months past my twenty-second birthday when I received such a call: "Hello. This is the prime minister's office here. We understand that you are going to London for studies, and we may be interested in offering you a job."

They clearly weren't talking about bar work, laboring, or cold-call marketing, the normal outlets for hard-up students, looking for beer money and enough cash to buy giant packets of pasta to ward off hunger.

I knew, deep in my gut, that the approach was either from the Mossad or Shabak, our equivalent of the FBI, but I didn't even want to say the name out loud, because that would have felt like some perverse form of betrayal. The call had the desired effect of making me think.

Predictably, there was a catch. They offered to pay for my education but wanted me to stay in London for two years. I had already decided that was not happening. I saw my future in Israel, and was merely taking time out, to come to terms with rejection.

I had come out of the army with a burning desire to become a designer. I made an initial application to one of Israel's leading art colleges toward the end of my national service. I submitted various artworks, and completed some pre-interview projects, but demand for places was extremely high, and my efforts were obviously not of the required standard.

While I was still smarting from that door smashing me in the face, another door opened. My parents invited me to accompany them to London,

where my father was assigned the task of overseeing the development of his bank's international infrastructure.

It was a no-brainer. Accommodation was included, so I would avoid the usual couch surfing. London seemed such an attractive, inviting city. It was vibrant, multicultural, and somehow grown-up, even if the weather was dour and Tel Aviv-style beach days were rare.

It gave me time to ponder Plan B, becoming a lawyer. I had an ordered mind, a keen eye for detail, and good people skills. I also appreciated the financial advantages of the profession. Yet my passion for the arts still stirred.

I enrolled to study English at Hendon College, an institute of higher education in the Colindale district, close to London's Great North Road. It would eventually be merged into Middlesex University. It was a nice place, advertised as being suitable for students aged between sixteen and ninety-nine.

I'd certainly had more life experience than most of my contemporaries, but that age range, which turned out to be a legal requirement, made me smile. I was at ease there, with my books and my burgeoning friendships.

But something was missing. That phone call was an emotional depth charge. Even without any confirmation of the identity of the interested party, they continued to engage with me. It made me wonder what they saw in me.

They could not know me intimately, until they looked me in the eye, got a hint of my strengths and weaknesses and tested my character. I was only twenty-two, after all. My CV was pretty threadbare. High school in Jerusalem and then what? I was in the war.

Yet the more I thought about it, the more sense their interest made. I realized my background was perfect. Beautiful family, religious, Zionist. Devoted to the nation. Served in the army as a commander. Even a history of resistance in the family. Everything's good.

They were clever. Communication remained open. They had laid the bait on the water. I was hungry, and swimming toward the hook. It was a matter of time before I bit. I realized I couldn't dictate terms, but after a few months, I took the initiative.

I was coming home because I wanted to build my life in Israel. I was serious, if they were. They were. I was put through the entrance screening

process, which tested mind and body, spirit and sinew. It was a surreal, occasionally tedious experience.

I didn't know what they were looking for from me. I had no option but to act naturally. There was no point in pretense. It would have been futile, and faintly absurd, to try to play the recruiters at their own game.

There is no template for the ideal operative, because it is a world of individual initiative with no set way of doing things, but the recruitment process is designed to tease out a way of operational thinking. The tests are a complete surprise.

You do not know what you are being tested for. They just tell you, this is the case, solve it. Let's see what you can do. Think on your feet. Build yourself a cover story. Break the law. Are you capable of doing that?

All the while, your profile is being created, shaped, massaged. Friends and family are quietly subjected to background security checks. You are questioned and diagnosed by operational psychologists, a relatively new, military-focused element in the profession.

They have pretty diverse duties. Their interrogation techniques are sharpened on those suspected of military crimes. They influence the execution of combat operations by using their expertise to uncover and distill the motives and actions of enemy forces. It's certainly different from the "tell me your life story, son" approach.

Within a few days, your entire life has tipped on its axis. You are being forced to respond to a new set of disciplines. You live in a company house or flat. You do not even really have a name anymore. You have to do things beyond the comprehension of normal people.

You are told to break into an apartment. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that it's on the fifth floor and owned by the Rabinovite family. They have given permission for the exercise because they are in the circle of trust, but you don't know that.

Your mission is to get into the master bedroom, return undetected to base and describe in detail everything you have seen and learned to the examiners. They don't particularly care about the wallpaper patterns or the softness of the bed linen, but they might have planted something that demanded your attention.

Good luck. Would you do that? Can you? Not everyone can.

You have to formulate a plan and stick to it under duress. You can't just approach the janitor and say, "I am a trainee of the Mossad, can you please

let me in? This is my pass." He'd look at you as if you'd taken leave of your senses, and surreptitiously call for backup.

Don't worry, in any case, unpleasant surprises are part of the process. The police, or what you assume to be the police, might turn up and ask you to explain yourself. Who are you? What are you doing there? Where have you come from? You had better get your story straight.

Inevitably, it won't do you any immediate good. You will be "arrested" and taken for questioning in a featureless room, by individuals who make their dislike for you pretty obvious. How do you deal with that? Do you have an exit strategy? It might be fantasy, but it feels frighteningly real.

Let's see those chameleon qualities, shall we? Your next assignment is to make a stealthy entry to a top hotel in Tel Aviv. Your task is to install a microphone inside a telephone earpiece in the middle of a busy lobby.

You will be watched by unseen eyes. Can you blend in as expertly as your assessors, who will be unrecognizable among the throng of tourists, businessmen, and hotel staff? Do you have the wit and subtlety to perform a delicate operation under pressure, and the calmness to vacate the premises with the minimum of fuss?

I'm happy to report I did, but the examination did not end there. This, remember, was 1983. The Mossad, in the initial stages of the leadership of Nahum Admoni, who took the top job when Yekutiel Adam, the director designate, was killed in the Lebanon War, was a different beast.

I had to undergo a lie detector test that included intrusive questions about my deepest personal life. I made a point later, when I was in charge of the organization, of ensuring the highest standards of equality and diversity.

The final part of the recruitment process was an irritating charade before a committee, consisting of veteran operatives who evidently saw little use in a yeshiva boy, sitting before them wearing his yarmulke as an act of faith they somehow regarded as provocative.

They were dinosaurs, oblivious to the asteroid heading in their direction. The Mossad, like Israeli society, was on the cusp of strategic change. The left-leaning elite, secularists whose grasp on political power was not as secure as they assumed, were on the wane.

I would not have been so disrespectful as to confirm this at the time—in fact, it did not cross my mind—but I represented, in a minor way, the shift to a broader-based culture in which graduates from prestigious religious

schools, like me, were gaining influence in politics, business, and the defense establishment.

Not that it made a jot of difference to my cross-examination by the committee. Courtesies and conventions were observed for a few minutes before Mossad's deputy director, who was chairing proceedings, cut to the chase. It was only later that I discovered who he was; he wanted to drill down into how my beliefs would be compatible with operational activity.

"So, suppose you have to travel on a Saturday," he said with a mocking smile.

"Well, sir, like in my infantry military service, and during the war in Lebanon, saving lives is more important than Shabbat. I will do whatever it takes."

"And if you have to turn on a light on Saturday, or drive a car on duty in Europe during the holy day?"

"If that is the job, then I have no problem with it."

"Suppose you run undercover, and the host offers you pork for lunch?"

I remained externally calm, but inside, my blood was boiling. A line was being crossed. I needed to think quickly and act cleverly, stand up for myself without sabotaging my chances.

"Listen, sir. I answered your call. I understand what this job requires. Can we move on from this topic, or do you wish to repeat yourself a little more?"

I felt the eyes of hostile committee members boring into my skull. The deputy director paused for effect, took my heavy hint (okay, my obvious defiance) in the spirit in which it was intended and changed tack.

He evidently liked my audacity. Having just turned twenty-two years of age, I was accepted on to the Mossad's cadet course. The first major obstacle had been cleared.

It's not quite as simple as saying that was the moment the old Yossi Cohen ceased to exist. I still had the same nature, capabilities, and attitudes. I was still in a position to use my talents. Yet, almost imperceptibly, I had changed.

The process reshaped me completely. In the beginning, I was not sure if I could do the kind of crazy, secret, dangerous things that were expected of me. I had been intrigued by the approach, and as the application process accelerated, I found I was attracted dramatically to the prospect of becoming a case officer, but now I knew I had the passion.

I understood I had a long way to go. I was raw and still had everything to prove. Yet it felt right. I wasn't perfect, but who is? I didn't have to look too far for evidence of human fallibility. One individual, an instructor on the cadet course, was dangerous. He was an experienced operative who invented intelligence and pretended he had recruited a very senior Syrian officer in an operation that never existed. It nearly caused a war between us and the Syrians.

The irony was that he had been a supposed mentor of mine. His role involved being the first to challenge my cover story in training. He investigated my methodology, judged my character, and tried to catch me out. If it wasn't so serious, it would have been hilarious.

To the best of my knowledge, he was indicted and went to jail. I promise I am not being wise after the event, but I suspected him from the very first day I laid eyes on him. He seemed flaky, a crazy guy. I was twenty-three at the time, and eager to get to work, in the field.

In many ways, I was older than my years. Combat experience does that for you. Like many in my generation, I matured as a young man in the Lebanon War, the so-called Operation Peace for Galilee that led to the expulsion of the PLO from the southern part of the country up to Beirut.

It was a successful operation. The PLO, surrounded in West Beirut and subjected to heavy bombardment from land, sea, and air, negotiated a ceasefire with the aid of United States Special Envoy Philip Habib. Led by Yasser Arafat, more than fourteen thousand combatants retreated from Lebanon to a new headquarters in Tunisia.

I had been drafted at the age of eighteen and volunteered for an infantry unit with a history of special forces-style missions dating back to the 1950s. I was attracted by the fighters' reputation for courage, discipline, and dedication to duty.

We were trained to trust our initiative, to fight alone or with other corps, in coordinated missions with the air force and navy. Our hallmarks were an ability to operate under any condition, day or night, and the flexibility to make swift, deadly battlefield incisions.

We did whatever was asked of us, whether that involved being dropped behind enemy lines, or in strategically important zones, by helicopter, being landed from amphibious craft, or fighting mounted on jeeps, against Syrian troops and their terrorist allies.

Once again, I found solace in a sense of belonging. We took great pride in our black berets, and of the status they represented. I had risen to sergeant, and was operating in a training camp, Base No. 80, when war was declared on June 6, 1982.

I was drafted into the newly formed 933rd "Nahal" Brigade. Our black berets (which have been replaced by light green headwear in the modern army) reflected its links to the Nahal movement, which combines social volunteerism, agriculture through the establishment of kibbutz farming communities, and military duty.

Our motto—"The human advantage"—was put to the test as we fought our way up the Mediterranean coast from An-Naqoura, a small Lebanese city just across from Israel's northern border. We arrived in armored vehicles with the aim of stopping the terrorists from launching seaborne attacks against Haifa, Tel Aviv, and other cities.

If I didn't have a veteran's swagger, I was certainly experienced enough to appreciate the difficulty of the mission, to clear a succession of settlements of hostile forces. We were, in effect, fighting the enemy on their own terms, in their own backyard.

The overarching plan, in a campaign that divided Lebanon into three sections, the eastern sphere, the central districts, and the coastal region, was to progress north, taking the cities of Tyre and Sidon before ending up in Beirut.

I never got to Beirut until I was a Mossad operative, but at least we had the satisfaction of seeing Yasser Arafat, and the PLO leadership, fleeing to Tunisia at the end of August, less than three months after the war began. It is estimated that at least eight thousand of his troops evacuated the capital and dispersed in a hurry.

It was a deadly conflict, on both sides. Clearing villages involved close-quarter fighting, in a maze of tight, roughly cobbled streets, on roofs and in courtyards. Danger lurked around every corner, on each patch of open ground.

We made it as far as Sidon before being deployed in the village of Rachaya el-Wadi, on the western slopes of Mount Hermon, close to the Syrian border. Our orders were to clear out nests of Palestinian fighters and their allies.

We came to a big house, which had to be neutralized, room by room, floor by floor. When we reached the roof, we were hopelessly exposed and

ruthlessly butchered. My company commander lost a leg. One of the other sergeants took several bullets to the stomach and fell into a stairwell.

I'd had two lucky escapes in previous operations, but this was the day I could quite easily have died. Pinned down in the firefight, lying behind a small wall on the roof, I suddenly took fire from an unexpected angle.

I felt a burst of pain and a flood of blood. I had been hit by two bullets, just beneath my left eye. I survived because they were glancing blows; another inch or so higher, and with an enemy with a better aim, and I would have been killed. As it was, we regrouped and fought our way out of trouble.

In elemental moments like that, you understand the bitter truth of the old soldier's maxim that only those who have been there, in the frenzy of pain and panic, death and dismemberment, can relate to the experience. It's not something that can be invented, despite the attempts to re-create it in an electronic game.

My wounds healed. I wasn't looking for proof of my ability to operate in life-threatening circumstances, but I got it. It didn't affect me badly. I know this might sound strange, but there was a greatness and gravity about it that l liked.

I discovered that I really didn't care about being at risk. I can do without the experience of being in peril, but it certainly doesn't bother me. In a way, it set me up for the abnormal life of an undercover officer, sitting in a hotel sipping coffee minutes before an operation, contemplating what was to come.

It's the same feeling of tightness in your gut as you approach border control. Going back to my days as a soldier, I loved every second of it.

I've never been afraid of my own mortality. I don't mind dying. I don't care about that. It's a constant source of anguished debate at home; I'm told to stop dwelling on the possibility, almost making light of it, when I feel I am merely being honest.

It's a complex subject, but my rationale is pretty straightforward. It's not important who I am, or what happens to me. It's important to do what I do, for my nation. It's important to be a good person, to care about mankind.

To the extent of me not being here, so what? We'll all go, finally. Some earlier, some later. Of course, there is a natural order of things. It is not always the case that parents are outlived by their children. My grandfather buried his kids.

I pray this doesn't come across as being callous, but I've seen friends and colleagues die. I didn't crash. I lost a cousin who was very dear to me, and then lost his son, which was a disaster, but I didn't lose control, even when the family suffered yet more tragedy in the aftermath of October 7. I kept on track.

I am concerned about the people I would leave behind, but they will survive. As I mentioned earlier, my father lost his mother eighty-nine years ago, but he has had a fulfilling life, even if he is showing signs of missing her more now than ever before.

I don't particularly want to get to ninety-two, like him. I don't cherish a long life. It is not the length of time you have on this planet that matters, it is the breadth of experiences you cram in along the way. I collect feelings, stories, adventures, operations, experiences. I need my heart rate to go up.

Of course, I take care of myself. I try to train daily. I try not to lose too much weight or put too much of it on. I prefer to eat one good meal a day. I don't smoke anymore, though I drank whiskey last night, come to think of it. I'm trying to live, but I have a fatalistic approach.

I have bodyguards, but there has never been an attempt on my life, because of the job I held. I'm not naïve; I know my enemies are after me, for good reason. I can understand their willingness to exact revenge.

I'm quite a colorful guy, I suppose. I'm not pareve (our description of kosher foods that are neither meat nor dairy, like eggs, fish, fruit, vegetables, grains, unprocessed juices, pasta, soft drinks, coffee, and tea), I'm red meat, a carnivore on the hunt.

I once read what is billed as the most successful personal finance book of all time, *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki. In it, he explores the influence of two men, his father and his best friend's father, on his approach to money and investment. The key message is that the assumption that you have to earn a high income to be rich is a myth.

If I write a book after this one, I will probably call it *Meaningful Fathers*. Hopefully, I am one. My message will be directed at my kids and their generation. You don't owe me, or anyone else anything. You don't have to try to be what you are not, on my behalf. It is your life.

As someone with leadership experience, I am often invited to consultation days, which generally attract people of around thirty-five years of age. They ask me for advice. What should they do? I tell them to ensure they've done all the good stuff by the time they get to fifty, because that's

the age when you start to look back and ask, “What have I done with my life?”

Live your life. Love what you do.

Chapter 5

Dinner for One

Everyone remembers their first time. Mine was in a European capital made for lovers. I would never again be as nervous, or as excited. I was a man of the world, ready to make his mark.

The night before I left home for my first mission was the hardest to endure. I played out scenarios in my head—good, bad, and disastrous. I tried to reassure myself my worries were normal, and that I would be as successful as I wanted so desperately to be.

The questioning of my Mossad tutors had ceased—for the time being, at least. Their caution had eased into something approaching acceptance. They had stretched me to the limit, and I had passed the stress test.

The psychologists were convinced I had the right stuff. I had reacted well to danger, real or imagined. I had proved resistant to interrogation and physical hardship. I was a tough nut to crack, and a willing pupil.

I had taken language courses, studied civilian lifestyles, to increase the effectiveness of my cover stories. My weaponry skills were more sophisticated than they had been when I was in the army, and I also knew how to covertly use a camera and a gun.

I had my own mental checklist to run through before they sent me into the field. I had demonstrated my confidence in handling different people in different ways, in different environments. I could be suave, if the situation demanded it, but, above all, I was streetwise.

A cycle was complete. I had spent months proving myself worthy of a chance to become a cadet. The next two and a half years were spent waiting, hoping, learning, preparing. Now my destiny beckoned.

I remembered the words of a great sporting hero, Muhammad Ali. “The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses: behind the lines in the gym,

out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights."

I would work in twilight, in a job like no other. The child imagines a spy having the eyes of a hawk, the cunning of a fox, and the speed and stealth of a jaguar. The man-child, who actually does the job, prays he has the nerve of a sniper, the instincts of a card sharp, and the luck of the devil.

I had a junior role during those first two months on the road. I was in the third line of a high-level operation, working logistically between the headquarters we had established in the city and the mission commander. I helped to shield him from exposure, by fetching and carrying, and played a small part in our success.

It was my introduction to a world in which everyone is a potential enemy. There is no such thing as a friendly country for a Mossad operative, regardless of political alliances. There is no friendly flight because you travel with secret intent. Everything is a risk from the moment you take off from Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv to the instant you plant your feet back on home soil.

You should be a shadow, a breath of wind. They see you, but they don't. You are there, but you are not. You operate, but no one knows what you do, or who you really are. You cannot be disclosed, discovered, identified. Otherwise, you will be burned.

Secrecy is a cloak you wear every day of the week, every minute of each day. Idle indulgences, such as softly singing a line of a favorite Hebrew song to yourself, can be deadly. Memories of who you were, in a parallel life, are suppressed by your cover story, or cover stories. You are on your own.

I felt pangs of loneliness on that first mission, but I also felt Jerusalem in my apartment. By that I mean I sensed the state behind me. I was not as close to the heart of darkness, as I would later be in Beirut or Gaza, so I caught glimpses of others, engaged in the same task.

Of course, there were moments when I longed to pick up the phone and speak to my family, but they passed, because of the impossibility of satisfying the urge. I was isolated from normality yet had a keen focus. I drew a strange form of strength from the purity of my purpose. I was there to serve my country.

There was a realization, almost a resignation, that this was the life I had chosen, voluntarily, for myself. Countless solitary dinners stretched before me, all around the world. I would take so many breakfasts alone, after yet

another night on my own, in a hotel room that was numbingly familiar and utterly soulless.

I'm not like this by nature. I have a lot of friends. I enjoy the ebb and flow of conversation, lubricated by good wine. I can even be the life and soul of the party. Professionally, though, I have to become the person I want people to think I am. My hidden vulnerability has to be a strength.

You must never become desensitized to danger, though you become accustomed to it. Your heart rate still rises, because of the ever-present risk, but you become comfortable with the heightened state of your emotions. You cannot lose faith in your instincts. Sharpness is your ultimate form of self-protection.

Everyone feels tension, trawling through different countries under another identity. You have to be super alert, like an animal freezing, ready for flight or fight when it senses a strange smell or hears an ominous noise, like a twig breaking underfoot, or the rustle of the undergrowth.

Who is threatening me? Everyone. Where will that threat come from? I have to be hyperaware of everything around me. Who, if anyone, has the target's back? I have to know there is no one there, waiting to pounce on me. Who has suspicions of me? I have to smell the doubt.

Funnily enough, the second mission is harder, because you have had an insight into what it takes. The risk is the same in the fourth or fifteenth or fiftieth mission, and you know that, whatever the temptation, you must never relax in the assumption nothing will happen.

By the time you are on your twenty-fifth operation, there is a repeatability to the process of preparation. You approach the task with almost a stream of consciousness.

Okay, what's the job at hand? Who is my commander? Who are my subordinates? What are they doing here? Where's the taxi? What should I do next? How do I communicate? Where is my secret cell phone? Did I cover my tracks? Was last night's hotel room sanitized when I left?

Hundreds of things fly through your mind, like crows disturbed from their nests. It is a different way of thinking, because a Mossad operative is always waiting for someone to knock on the door and say, "Hello, Police." You must be ready for the predictable questions. Who are you? What are you doing here? How did you get here?

If there are two of you involved, you have to sing the same song, knowing that they will cross-check and cajole, in the hope of catching you

out. You cannot be countered by a partner, giving different details in a different room to a different investigator.

The more people they round up, the more complicated it becomes. Say four of you are pulled over in a car. Which one of us is the widower? Who is the boss? What's his background? What's the name of the driver's wife? Does he have children? What about our female colleague, in the backseat? Is she married? Where did she go to university? What line of work do we do, and how did we meet? Can we remember our agreed addresses?

There are so many ways to trip up, and if that happens there are no easy landings. In a way, being alone is a kind of shield.

An operative has to be sure-footed on shifting sands. You get the vibe of everything that is moving around you, because you are penetrating other people's lives without them understanding what is happening to them.

It's very important to create an aura of superiority. Targets in recruitment operations must know, or at least suspect, that you know more than them. It is vital to understand their mentality, their ambitions, their psychological profile, their true nature. You work out the structure of their mind and the depth of their soul.

You are waiting for that sweet moment of surrender. Very few of us can understand the intensity of that moment. Inside, you are screaming, *He's mine!* But be careful. Don't act. Be stable. Take it easy. You have to be in complete control of your emotions.

I am sad or happy according to the operational need. You have to play the game, predict where the chess pieces will move, and with what intent. It normally takes weeks to gather human intelligence and translate it into action.

What is in the target's DNA? We need to take a deep dive into their personal and professional life, examine their entourages and relationships. Habits and travel itineraries provide important clues. We need to set the terms of engagement.

None of them are naïve. Many seek security. Some are even guarded, physically. They may be under surveillance from their own regime or government. They are quite likely to be a terrorist. All of this feeds into the game plan, the cover story.

You may be alone in the act of recruiting a live agent, but you are not flying solo. The operative, taking care of business, is helped by a group of

people in the background. They will think with him, support him with intelligence, tend to his needs. This was not always the case in the past.

He or she must act undercover, to avoid detection by local law and security forces, while convincing the target that they initiated the relationship. There is an art to creating contact, maneuvering the target into position, so that they are within the forcefield of your freshly created false personality.

Cover stories have to be practical. Let's say I'm posing as Antoine Fraser, an international Lebanese specialist attending an archaeological conference in Beirut. I'm researching the large-scale excavations in Baalbek, and have a special interest in the Jupiter Temple, the most important temple of the Roman Empire.

As I'm sure you know, only six of the original fifty-four columns remain standing. I'm seeking introductions to experts on the excavation of the nearby quarry, which unearthed the largest stone building blocks made by human hands. Weighing 1,650 tons, and nearly twenty meters high, they were too heavy to transport to the temple.

That should give me context when I arrive in Lebanon, when I move around the country, and when I depart.

Cover stories also have families. Again, for the sake of argument, I am Aatazaz Khalil, a Lebanese tea trader, investigating business opportunities in Sudan. That gives me scope to operate, before, during, and after my initial visit, which is designed to add weight to my story when I come into contact with my target on my return.

I am embellishing the same cover story as I go along. This is where human intelligence comes in. My story has to suit you, as my target. I have to wear a suit that you like. I have to tell you a story that engages you, without your suspecting it was made for you.

I'm back in Sudan to study your new teas. What's that you say, you're a tea collector? Really? What a surprise! My father was one too. That's how I got into this business. Where did you study? Are there any strains you prefer? I would be grateful for your insight.

Contact made. Suddenly you are friends.

Of course, he will check you out. It is so much easier today than it was ten or twenty years ago. The tea salesman story has to be much more layered, much more sophisticated. It has to be resistant to scrutiny and be legitimized by invented detail.

I can usually create a new life, a new image for myself, in two days. That will give the curious observer the full range of sources to pore over: a website, family, online followers, academic achievement, business background, sporting and artistic interests.

Now you, my friend and target, can be reassured. You can apparently confirm everything I have told you. You can see if I am there on the web. You can see if my company exists or not. If you have friends in the right places, and I am sure you have, you can check my movements, in and out of the country.

It's harder to maintain the pretense but not impossible.

The new reality is that everything is being photographed, filmed, controlled by CCTV. We live under the gaze of unseen eyes. Biometrics make it easier to check someone's background. When you go to border control, it doesn't need someone to speak to you or stamp your passport. They already have your face.

It doesn't take that long to get into character, though at the start of your career it feels like a big sweat. You worry about what you will say, the nuances of the language you use, but the more operations you do, the easier it becomes.

It's almost a habit. Playing a different person is what you do for a living. You swap roles like an actor. One day you are a lawyer, the next a businessman. Though I create and inhabit countless characters there is no chance of them sending me into some sort of mental maze, so that I forget who I really am.

Does the actor who plays Detective Sergeant Trotter in *The Mousetrap* in the West End of London behave like a policeman when he goes to the pub with his friends after the show? I think not.

I switch straight out of character. I have to at home. The minute I entered the house, as my family was growing up, my wife gave me the babies to feed. The elder kids screamed for daddy's attention. Now I have the delights of my grandchildren to distract me. Normal life takes over.

My cover stories usually involve a combination of languages and cultures. My mother tongue besides Hebrew is Yiddish, with hints of Aramaic, which is not terribly useful in the Mossad, because of the inevitable association with Israel.

I'm not so easy to typecast, because I don't have a dominant linguistic characteristic, like a strong British accent. That means I have to build my

characters slightly differently. I speak four languages well, and two tolerably. It's a kind of strength. My major languages are French, Arabic, and English and, if you go around the world, it will be hard to find someone who speaks all those languages fluently.

If you go to the Middle East, they will do Arabic and French, Arabic and English, or French and English. Canadians will do English and French. Americans will do English and maybe, given today's social trends, Spanish. The English tend to do English.

So, say my character was born in Lebanon, but moved to Canada at the age of twelve. I can flirt with you in French, and quote passages from *Candide*, by Voltaire. My fictitious background explains why my Arabic is not perfect, but I still have to speak in the right dialect.

For instance, Lebanese Arabic is a variety of North Levantine Arabic, indigenous to the country. Some Lebanese people are bilingual, or even trilingual. They are known to switch easily between Arabic, French, and English. The pattern fits.

I struggle to remember specific cover names, since there have been so many, but the first name that I took to enthusiastically was Gabriel, because of its angelic, biblical connotations.

The name Gabriel scans nicely in French or in English. I have been Neil and Andrew, but never Joe or Josef, never Jewish, never American. For many years, before I was referred to as "Y," I answered to the code name Callan, the lead character of a British TV crime series from the 1970s.

As a teenager, I worshipped this brilliant, charismatic, and sarcastic detective, even though he was embittered, insecure, and selfish. He felt real, authentic. I prefer British film and theater to its gaudy Hollywood equivalent, and the sets were gray and gritty. There was very little music, but so much human interaction.

The character of David Callan, played by British actor Edward Woodward, was a British intelligence officer whose fictional "section" employed the most ruthless of methods to deal with perceived threats to the state.

No writer captures the reality of my world better than John le Carré, but as pure entertainment, this was kind of fun. It was aggressive, it was brave, I liked the way he knew how to get stuff done. It was nonstructured, against the law.

Oh, and in case you are wondering, it had no influence on the way I worked.

Speaking of Le Carré, I once heard that a good source of his, in my line of work, explained to him: "The HUMINT target has to hate someone and to love someone." I understood the sentiment. They are two sides of the same tarnished coin. I hate what some people represent, and the regimes they serve, but as individuals, they may have redeeming qualities. I can empathize with their situation.

Weakness is an enduring fascination, and exploiting it is a trick of the trade. Detecting it can be a long, drawn-out process. It takes time, guile, and effort to know what is within someone's soul. Some hide it beautifully.

A quick double click usually only gives a false impression. The emotions are fake, the images are an illusion. The fact that someone smiles on Instagram does not mean they are happy. The fact that they give a breathless account of their successes on Twitter, or X as it is now known, does not mean it is accurate or trustworthy. It's not the real story. Dig deeper, though, and you can find the real thing.

Some people are easier to read than others. Some simply don't care.

How do you get to know what is really eating someone? How do you get to be his best friend when he knows nothing about you? You came out of the blue. He has lived fifty-five years without you. Why would he tell you his deepest secrets?

What chasm between us do I have to bridge so that, one day, in a weak moment, he will say, "I have bad money troubles," or "You know that secret flat I have in London? I like to go there and dress up in women's clothing"?

We are usually dealing with someone with a lot to lose, and they have a great incentive to put the shutters up. I can stop them doing so by discovering what motivates them. Greed, money, position, ideology, friendship, sex, love, securing their future, beliefs, hatred, jealousy; once I know what button to press, I have something to work with.

It can be as simple as giving someone something they've never had. That doesn't necessarily mean material rewards, creature comforts. It may be the human touch of a friend they can talk to, a friend who listens, tells them it is okay not to be happy, not to be perfect.

With an officer in the Syrian army, a nuclear scientist in Iran, or a high-ranking member of state, I am attempting to elicit the ultimate betrayal. At the end of the day, he has to know what he is doing. You cannot fake the

reasoning for something so profound. In part, these targets have volunteered themselves.

Some look into the abyss and pull back. Their inner spirit can be disruptive, but also instructive. In any event, you have to make sure they will not harm themselves, or the operation. Can he bury the burden of being a source, or will it drive him crazy? It's a critical judgment call.

Some do not have a choice. Life, in a way, is so much more dangerous with us, but so much better. They can breathe a little easier with us because they can see a future. In effect, he is buying that future for himself and his family.

I have met with the families, gone into their homes, though it carries a risk. There is always a chance of opposition, if they know the full story, or distrust, even if they don't. Who is this Lebanese guy? What does he want from you? Is he too good to be true? The answers have to be quick and credible.

It goes both ways. The target may want to explore and express his friendship in precarious ways. He might want to meet my wife and family or visit my house. Maintaining a cover story in those circumstances can become a nightmare.

It can be complicated, but I have always believed in the unique value of failure. I do fail, like everyone. When I am unable to close a deal no one does a harsher debrief than myself. I have not forgotten the young foreign officer I was trying to turn in a carefully managed operation in Europe.

He was a brute, but smart, and he challenged my cover brutally. I thought our meetings went extremely well, and the contact was great, but information was received indicating that he didn't buy my cover story.

He didn't have any proof, but he definitely didn't like what I had tried to sell him. He had seen through me. The mission was aborted. I melted into the background and made my escape. I was lucky I was only twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and at the start of my career.

I had time on my side. I knew I could not afford to make another mistake of that magnitude.

Chapter 6

A Sacred Duty

Joseph Fink, known to everyone as Yossi, was born in Manchester, England, on June 2, 1965, and moved to Israel with his family, age six. Quiet and shy, he was a perfectionist, a keen sportsman and musician who aspired to excellence in everything he did.

He was kind and attentive, nurturing his younger sisters by helping them with their studies. He had the reputation of being the first to reach out to help a friend in need, and used his savings, from a series of part-time jobs, to build a library of holy books.

In 1983, he joined the Yeshivat Hesder program, which allows Orthodox Jews to combine their advanced Talmudic studies with military service in the Israel Defense Forces. They are enlisted for sixteen months, rather than the usual three years, but Yossi proved to be a determined, adaptable soldier.

His willingness to give spiritual guidance and physical encouragement to his colleagues, in the elite Shaked Battalion of the Givati Brigade, meant that he was being considered for promotion when, at midday on February 17, 1986, he was in one of three Mercedes cars in a military convoy that set out to patrol the security zone in southern Lebanon.

They were ambushed by Hezbollah terrorists approximately five hundred meters south of the Yehon junction, coming under sustained and heavy fire. Yossi was hit several times and was unable to defend himself due to the severity of his wounds.

He was taken into captivity with his friend Rahamim Alsheikh, a member of the traditionalist Yemenite community, who was also wounded before running out of ammunition. The youngest of seven children, he was

two years older than Yossi, a similarly studious young man known for his moderation and composure.

The following day, Hezbollah issued a head-to-head photograph of two unidentified Israeli soldiers. Their demands, which had to be met to secure their release, were published within another twenty-four hours.

To rachet up the pressure, on the same day the CBS television network in Damascus broadcast a report showing the pair's personal belongings and identity discs. Yossi's family confirmed the authenticity of the crocheted skullcap that his sister had knitted for him, around five years previously.

A gruesome game had begun, one that is being repeated today with our hostages in Gaza. It would be conducted on different levels and driven by the type of inhumanity that involves corpses being used as bargaining chips in a psychological war designed to establish military or political advantage.

That's why, at the outset, I wanted to provide a small summary of Yossi and Rahamim's background and character. I wanted to embellish their names, so lives cut short too soon can be appreciated. It is a form of homage to members of my generation I did not meet, but I identified with, and mourned unashamedly. They were someone's son, brother, friend, comrade.

The IDF's doctrine is that no soldier, either dead or alive, will be left behind in battle. The official policy of the Israeli government is that it "will do everything in its power to secure the release of POWs and MIAs and anyone who acted on behalf of state security, and to bring them home."

The government refuses formally to negotiate with terrorists but has on several occasions entered into indirect talks to bring home its kidnapped soldiers. Since 1948, Israel has signed separate repatriation agreements with Egypt, Jordan, and other nations in the Middle East.

The Mossad is philosophically aligned to the cause. It has a specific department with responsibility for gathering information about missing troops. It involves working in a kind of quicksand that swallows truth, but it is regarded as a sacred duty.

That duty fell to me, to confirm the status of Yossi and Rahamim. We did not know where they were, other than they were in the hands of Hezbollah, who knew the value of their captives, whatever their condition.

A Shiite Muslim militant group that grew out of the Lebanese Civil War, it forms part of Iran's vision of the Shiite crescent moving from Iran,

cutting through the 60 percent Shia population in Iraq and Syria, and then into Lebanon.

It operates as a state within a state and is a terror organization that, now as then, has to be disrupted or dismantled. My mission, to identify and recruit a senior terrorist with access to information about the soldiers' fate, was not undertaken lightly, because no one had infiltrated Hezbollah that deeply before.

International mediation had its limitations, however well intentioned. We needed someone close to Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's shadowy chief of staff, to get what we needed. Logically, that meant a senior figure either in intelligence or the security apparatus.

I set my sights on a veteran Lebanese terrorist, an educated, unpleasant terrorist more than twenty years my senior. I knew his name and worked from there. For our purposes let's call him Abdullah, which means "servant of God."

I suspected he operated in the sort of orbit we required but didn't know for sure. The good news was that I discovered he was looking to secure his future financially. The bad news was that he was looking in the wrong direction, to Latin America.

I tracked him there and found him setting himself up as a businessman, with the intention of starting a new life. It was a sunset pension plan and, if he found himself out of favor and excluded from Mughniyeh's inner circle, it presented an obvious problem.

For him to be of use to us, Abdullah needed to be persuaded to recommit to Hezbollah and continue to operate within the entourage. That posed a moral and practical dilemma that required a strong stomach and an agile brain to resolve.

This was one of those cases that pushes the boundaries of reason. It involved recruiting an enemy who had Jewish blood on his hands. Viewed dispassionately, there was no other choice. We do, and we will, work with such people.

Why? Because he is the one with access to the intel we need. He is the one who will source it, within his own terrorist cell. It doesn't really matter whether that is in Hezbollah, Hamas, or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

It is not pragmatism. It is not forgiveness. It is ownership. I need his intel. I need him to be mine. I'm not going to kill him. He's not going to

disappear. I will use him. He will use me probably. I need him. He needs me too.

When I recruit a source, he is not one of us. He is not a member of the Mossad. He is not a friend, although I will do everything in my power to make him think that he is. We do not force anyone to work with us.

You can't threaten someone, saying I'll show a video of you doing this and that with that attractive Dutch lady if you do not cooperate. That's for trashy movies or throwaway paperback books. It doesn't work. If they don't want to, they don't want to.

Some are initially led to think they are operating under a foreign flag, but eventually they've got to know what they are doing, and who they are doing it with. You have to convince them that it is okay, that there is a future in it. Betrayal must be a conscious act.

The sensitivities are obvious. A Hezbollah fighter is conditioned to believing in the sanctity of two things, the defense of Lebanon and his status as a delegate of Allah. He is subservient to the religious aspects of his life. The literal English translation of Hezbollah is "Party of Allah," or "Party of God."

I have now recruited several such terrorists; Abdullah was not the first, but arguably set the template for other missions. They are true believers. This is where my religious background informs my intelligence work because it enables me to get inside their religious heads.

I understand the dynamics of devotion. I know that beliefs are literal articles of faith. They are not open to negotiation. Religion is comforting, because in the case of a Hezbollah terrorist, martyrdom, or *istishadi*, will automatically grant access to paradise.

The tensions of traditional belief can be seen everywhere, no more tellingly than on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. It has been venerated as a holy site in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for centuries, but remains a source of conflict.

As a Jew, I revere it as the site where God gathered the dust to create Adam and where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac to prove his faith. King Solomon, according to the Bible, built the First Temple of the Jews there around 1000 BCE, only for it to be torn down four hundred years later by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who sent many Jews into exile.

In the first century BCE, Herod the Great, a Roman Jewish client king of Judea, expanded and refurbished a Second Temple built by Jews who had

returned from banishment. The Gospel of John tell us Jesus Christ lashed out against the money changers here and was later crucified a few hundred yards away.

A Muslim fighter would call the Temple Mount Haram al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary. He would revere it as the site of the Prophet Muhammad's ascent to the "Divine Presence" on the back of El Buraq, a magical white winged horse. The so-called Miraculous Night Journey of Muhammad is commemorated by one of Islam's architectural gems, the Dome of the Rock shrine.

To deride such legends as fairy tales is ignorant and unnecessarily provocative. It challenges sacred convention and gives focus to an enemy's hate.

Every religion has what non-believers would charitably call eccentricities. Think about it: 1.4 billion Hindus around the world worship Ganesha, a supreme deity with an elephant head transplanted onto a human body with four arms.

Ganesha is celebrated as a source of goodness, the remover of obstacles, the bringer of good luck, the overseer of intellect and wisdom, and the patron of arts and sciences. As the god of beginnings, he is honored at the start of rites and ceremonies. Watch ordinary Indians, as I have, openly crying in front of his familiar statue as they pray for health and wealth, and it is impossible not to be moved by the power of belief, which is a constant factor across religions.

I believe in the moral purpose that drives us to be better human beings. I want to be better as a person. I think, generally, that is a noble aim for all mankind. But I also believe that the minute people come into this tough world, their destiny has been designated.

I call it the "Principle of the Pipe."

Let's take three pipes—mine, Adbullah's, and a Hindu, someone from New Delhi—for the sake of argument. How many things in our lives are a result of choice? You can change your environment, but can you change the accident of birth?

I was born Jewish and will die Jewish. Abdullah was born a Muslim and will die a Muslim. Our friend from India was born a Hindu and will die a Hindu. So, what do we choose? Our place of birth? No. Our religion? No. Will we change our religion? Almost certainly not. What about our life

partners? Do we choose freely from the eight billion people on this planet? No. My wife, Aya, was part of my pipe, as I was hers.

Did a Hezbollah terrorist, born and brought up in a camp, choose anything? Was it inevitable that he would end up as being intensely religious, full of hatred against me, against us all, creating troubles in the world, outside his pipe? I would say so.

What we can choose is the value systems in our lives. I visit people in prison and listen to their sad stories about how they became criminals. Most of them blame their environment for their plight. I met a killer, serving thirty-five years. A very smart guy, a Muslim with perfect Hebrew.

He runs the radio station in the jail. You look at him and want to hug him, as he explains to you the realities of his background. He lived in a bad neighborhood. He says that the area created who he is. He had to fight for everything, food, money, the right to exist.

Criminals are harder to recruit because they are empty. They believe in nothing, care for no one. They have no anchor point. They are resentful and ruthless. They have no loyalty to any nation. The world is against them, and you can never truly trust them.

I wasn't armed on this occasion, approaching Abdullah, but I have been when things did not feel quite right. One of my earliest lessons involved a Mossad operative who was shot by a suspicious Palestinian terrorist in a restaurant in a European capital. He was taken by surprise, though he survived.

With all that in mind, the challenge becomes clinical. Rage or relief comes later when the mission has played out. I put Abdullah, an important target, under intensive observation, rather like a research scientist studying the behavior of a laboratory rat.

The places he goes, the people he meets, the plans he is pursuing, all help to formulate a strategy to initiate contact. I chose, as my cover story, the character of a sour, cynical Argentinian businessman, seeking partners to make money, with few questions asked.

This was the first level of engagement. I started to build a relationship with him. Abdullah was a very tough guy, wary and mistrustful, but he came to like me as a kindred spirit. We were both, in our way, survivors, looking to make a good living.

He liked me even more when I put a couple of small jobs his way. I began to float the possibility of us working together more seriously. As men

of the world, we had a lot in common.

That took us to the second level, which encompasses what we call deterioration. This is when we ask the questions, or reveal the answers, we could not raise or admit to in the early days of the relationship. The idea is to deteriorate what we call the object in our direction.

When he crosses a certain line or gets in a little too deep, then we tell him that it is an intelligence operation. We need the sort of information he can supply because it is extremely valuable to us. I told Abdullah I wanted him to go back to Lebanon, to remain embedded in Hezbollah.

He was an intelligent, hard-headed guy. He walked round the bases very quickly. Who is this person? A businessman interested in Hezbollah? Why? He's got to be doing more than being paid by some researcher from a Washington think tank, which is what he told me.

It was time to come clean, or clean-ish.

"Well, my friend, I want you to be my partner. I have friends who will pay us both well. I have already helped you, and I will continue to help you in the future, on one condition. Remain with Hezbollah, for the time being at least. We can do something with it, business-wise."

Abdullah was obviously uneasy and weighing up his options. Here, after all, was a man with the dark heart of a hardened terrorist. I took an educated gamble that the profit motive would overwhelm whatever principles he had left to uphold, and, after some theatrical resistance, revealed what I told him was "my biggest secret."

"I want you to be a source, just as I am a source," I said.

"To whom?" he answered.

"To the Israelis."

"No way. Did you tell them about me?"

"Of course not. But I know how desperate they are for information about those missing soldiers. It is one of their most important missions. I think we can make a lot of money together if we help one another. What do you think?"

We had reached a crisis point. This was an invitation to heresy, a despicable act against the belief system that had taken him, willingly and successfully, into a bloody conflict with Israel. He cut short the conversation and cut off all communications with me. He didn't return calls for several days. Then, suddenly, he said he was ready to speak.

In our region, you walk and you talk when you have an important decision to reach, or an agreement to make. The British may like to seal the deal with brandy and cigars in mahogany-paneled bars, but this is somehow more respectful. It is certainly more personal.

"Listen," I said, "what we have done so far is beautiful, but we could do so much more with them."

"What's the deal?"

"I know they have some funny missions with Hezbollah, but who cares about that? Do we care? No. I'm like you. Let's see what they have to offer. I bet it is a lot."

He was wavering but needed a final nudge. I suggested, to end all doubt, that he should secretly meet my Mossad contact. If we liked what he had to offer, he would be the person we would be working with.

Abdullah agreed. It was one of those beautiful moments of surrender.

My "contact" kept the perfect distance from me, treated me respectfully, as a client. He then took us to the tipping point by offering to secretly take us to Tel Aviv, as a gesture of faith. We would be briefed about our role and promised any assistance we required.

It was a huge call for our target to make, but he made the one we wanted.

I would be going back to Israel with him and walking the streets of Tel Aviv I knew so well, but as a supposed foreigner with a false identity. I prayed I would not meet someone who knew me or of me. Thankfully, this was in the days when no public photograph of me existed.

Things moved quickly. I soon had another voice in my ear. It belonged to no less than Shabtai Shavit, the Mossad director, may he rest in peace. For him to be calling someone as low down on the food chain as me highlighted the importance he attached to our initiative.

"No matter what happens, you will not break your cover story," he ordered. "You must never tell the target you are Jewish. You have permission to make any deals you need, with the soldiers in mind."

It was just another surreal moment in a surreal episode. I even managed to sneak a quick visit to my parents in Jerusalem one afternoon, when my companion was being looked after elsewhere. It was a brief break from an incredibly intense operation, which had months still to run.

Terrorists do not give up their secrets quickly, or easily. I had to maintain subtle pressure on Abdullah, without spooking him. He was

playing a dangerous game since exposure would not be forgiven. The best he could hope for, after prolonged torture, would have been an unmarked grave.

Mercifully, his native cunning and careful use of his internal network within Hezbollah enabled him to survive, to complete massive, vital work. I will never forget the day he came to me with proof Yossi and Rahamim were dead. He delivered to me, in private, all the details I needed.

He described how they were seized, where they were taken and how they passed away from their wounds, within hours of one another soon after their capture. He had located their bodies. All that remained, before the negotiators took over, was for the chief rabbi of the army to use his theological authority to designate them dead.

As the news sank in, I managed to keep the last shreds of my self-control and made a polite request to be permitted to visit the bathroom, just off the lobby of the hotel in which we were meeting. Abdullah gave this casually.

Once inside the toilet area, I broke down and wept. The intense loneliness of my work, the months of worry and continual unease, swept over me. I felt an acute, reflected pain. Those poor boys. They probably had no chance. I could not help but imagine their lifeless bodies, awaiting rescue.

Less emotionally, I knew that by turning a well-connected, vastly experienced terrorist, I had helped to change the entire structure of negotiations with Hezbollah. They could no longer claim they were holding two live soldiers, who would carry a substantial premium. They would have to exchange bodies for bodies. As grim as that sounds, it was progress.

The success of one of the most significant missions of my life had a profound effect on me. When I returned home, I poured out my heart to my wife, Aya, who had already been given security clearance to hear certain details. “You seem to have found a job that suits you well,” she said. “Who knows, maybe one day you will be the head of the Mossad.”

I dismissed the thought instantly.

Many more tears were to be shed by families living in a limbo of grief and unsustainable hope. In 1991, Gad Navon, then the IDF’s chief rabbi, told them that new intelligence had led the army to believe the two soldiers were dead. He could not offer more specific information, because of the risk of compromising intelligence sources.

It would be five unimaginably long years before the bodies were flown, on July 22, 1996, to the military air base at Lod from Beirut, via Larnaca in Cyprus, on a German air force C-130 transport plane accompanied by Chancellor Helmut Kohl's top intelligence adviser, Bernd Schmidbauer, who spent three months mediating the biggest deal between Israel and Hezbollah for fourteen years.

As the plane rolled to a halt, a platoon of purple-bereted soldiers from the Givati Brigade, in which Fink and Alsheikh served, lined up in formation. The lead coffins, draped in Israeli flags, were removed as Rabbi Gad Navon recited psalms.

Each flanked by an honor guard of six Givati sergeants, the coffins were taken to the largest hospital in Israel, the Sheba Medical Center in the Tel Aviv neighbourhood of Tel HaShomer, where the remains were positively identified.

Soon afterward, the remains of 123 terrorists were handed over in Kfar Tebnit, a small village on Lebanon's southern border with Israel. They were taken to a mosque in Beirut for mass burial.

Yossi Fink was buried at 5:00 that evening in the military section of the Ra'anana cemetery in Tel Aviv. Rahamim was laid to rest two hours later at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl military cemetery. Both funerals were attended by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As he stood over Yossi's grave, the PM said: "We were given the right to ease the suffering of mourning parents by bringing their children home." I still feel the responsibility of fulfilling that right, although there have been many more mourning parents in the intervening years.

Did I mourn Imad Mughniyeh when he finally met his end, blown to bits by a bomb, planted in the famous Mitsubishi Pajero that exploded as he was about to open his car door at just after 10:45 p.m. on February 12, 2008, in a smart suburb of Damascus?

Of course not. He was a wanted man in forty-two countries. The FBI had offered a $25 million reward for information leading to his capture. He had killed hundreds of Americans in Lebanon in the 1980s. He oversaw kidnapping, brutal torture, the slaughter of innocents like Yossi and Rahamim.

Did he deserve to die? Undoubtedly. Contemporary foreign reports attributed the operation to the Mossad, but it was not until September 2024 that former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert confirmed, against all convention,

that he was assassinated by an Israeli-led operation that had been planned in cooperation with the United States.

Revenge has not been a primary motive since the days my organization hunted down those responsible for the Munich massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics. Men like Mughniyeh are killed not merely because of what they have done, but what they may continue to do, to threaten a way of life I, and millions of others, hold dear.

Chapter 7

According to Foreign Reports

Every liberal democracy is confronted by an identical dilemma. What means can, or should, a state employ to protect its citizens and its national security when the possibility is that at least some of those measures will neither be legal nor ethical?

Is it permissible to penetrate databases to harvest personal details? Is it principled to covertly track someone's movements and beliefs? Is it reasonable to lie, steal, sabotage, and destroy? More darkly, is it excusable to investigate suspects under interrogation, or to kill someone who is perceived to be a threat to the nation and its people?

The restraints of national and international law must be factored in, but the notion of universal moral standards is more difficult to quantify. Sometimes, to join so many others in misquoting John Wayne, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

What the Great Cowboy actually said, in the 1939 film *Stagecoach*, was, "Well, there's some things a man just can't run away from." He was speaking my language there, since there are no easy choices facing the man or woman in charge of an agency like the Mossad.

I've become used to people saying that I am in an immoral business that is, by its nature, disturbing and utterly wrong. It can be extremely dirty, but I'll willingly dispute those criticisms, because of an underpinning philosophy.

I don't do things automatically. I think deeply about them. I hesitate. I rethink, I regroup. Then I act. I am steadfast in my belief in the legitimacy of Mossad's job. Whatever it does, whatever it has to do, it is the right thing to do.

All nations are self-protective. Each has a security apparatus it would prefer not to talk about in any great detail. Israel is a tiny state. Jews have not been landlords of our own home for around two thousand years. Think of us, the Mossad, as the concierge in the lobby, with one eye on the alarm button and the other on the security cameras.

I have normal interests, passions and social causes that I pursue with conviction. I am proud of the way my son Yehonatan proved to be influential in the wider acceptance of the potential of those with special needs. That has led, in my organization at least, to a recalibration, a concentration on ability rather than disability. If it is his fate to be known as a differently abled superman, so be it.

If any of my children came to me and asked if they could be one of the fifty thousand or so who apply to join the Mossad annually, I would welcome it, after interrogating them on their motivation.

And I would say: "Don't do this because of me, out of respect or family duty. Do this because of you. Do this because of your desires and dreams. Do you know what we do? Do you like what we do? By the way, do you realize how rare it is these days for people to have a job they like?"

I understand the economic pressures on the young. In working for the Mossad, you are a state employee. It is not a route to boundless wealth. I have a lovely home, a very comfortable lifestyle in terms of the things I can afford, but I have only just paid off my mortgage after forty years.

A strong and consistent message to my children is: If you want to do something, just do it. Who cares? Be a dancer, cook, actor, singer, whatever, as long as you don't harm yourself and your family and society. Help and contribute to your state, your people. Celebrate your individualism. Carve your own path through the jungle of life.

Revealingly, there is a surge in applications to the Mossad whenever a major mission comes to public attention. We received more than ten thousand CVs in the immediate aftermath of the theft of the Iranian nuclear archive in 2018. It excites the imagination but, on a deeper level, speaks to something within us, as citizens of an embattled nation. It is a national institution; some would say a national treasure.

I rose to become head of Tzomet HUMINT, the human intelligence division. Another division deals with confidential relationships with our foreign counterparts, like MI6 and the CIA. Only a few hundred of our staff

are operatives; many more work in financial intelligence, research, and technology, in addition to supportive roles in HR.

This is the letter from David Ben-Gurion, the father of modern Israel, authorizing the establishment of the Mossad. It is framed, in large fonts, on the main corridor in the Mossad headquarters:

"SECRET"

22 Kislev 5710
13 December 1949
To: The Foreign Ministry
From: The Prime Minister

Upon my instructions, an institute is being established to coordinate state intelligence agencies (the Military Intelligence Department, the Foreign Ministry State Department, the Shin Bet, etc.).

I have charged Reuven Shiloah, Foreign Ministry adviser for special projects, to organize and head the institute. Reuven Shiloah will report to me. He will act upon my instructions and will submit regular working reports to me. For administrative purposes, his office will be part of the Foreign Ministry.

I have instructed R. Shiloah to submit a manpower and budget proposal for 1950–1951 for approximately IL20,000, IL5,000 of which will be used for special operations, contingent on my prior authorization.

You are hereby requested to add this sum to the Foreign Ministry budget for 1950–1951.

[Signed] D. Ben-Gurion

Everyone speaks about the "vision thing," the phrase used by George H. W. Bush when outlining his plans ahead of the 1988 US presidential election. You hear and see leaders referring to their vision, as if they are writing words of wisdom across the sky.

That's nice. It can even be stirring if the mood takes. But vision means much more when action is attached. How will you put it into operation? What deeds will be inspired by your words? How will you ensure your aims are not just empty gestures?

You have to know yourself. You have to understand your people. To borrow a line from one of England's great hymns, then, and only then, can you build Jerusalem, among those dark Satanic mills.

Just before I left the Mossad, I made it my mission to make personal contact with all my subordinates. There were thousands of them. I was meticulous about meeting them, not as individuals, but as members of their units, in groups large enough to be practical but small enough to make a difference. I wanted to hear their voices, understand their views.

The main difference I saw, between my organization and those of others in Israel and the wider world, is the employees' belief in the principle behind the vision. It is total. These are smart, independently minded people, not a flock of sheep, so don't run away with the idea they were saying things to impress the boss.

People want to work with the Mossad, so we are in a position to choose. The application process allows us to sift, strain, filter, refine, and reduce the number of candidates we select. We seek the best of the best. We are looking for the men and women who embody the best qualities of our society.

It's important to remember all are volunteers. They have to have the will to work for the state of Israel. They have to be loyal to the nation, and our values. Forgive me for inventing a word here, but they have to exercise their Israelism, and by that, I mean their national spirit.

The most revealing discovery of the consultation process was that very few of them thought it was essential to operate within the rules. They understood, and expressed their support for, the overarching aims of the organization. We need to fight the Iranians. We need to fight Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad. We need to fight terrorism, in all its forms.

They were comfortable with the principle of deadly action, in defense of the vision.

That works, as long as the vision is moral, and it doesn't discriminate on political, economic, or religious grounds. This is not a case of right or left, hawk or dove, rich or poor, pious or agnostic. There is more that unites us than divides us.

To give an example, I was recently waiting at JFK Airport for a return flight from New York to Tel Aviv. As is usual, it was late. I got chatting to an eminent academic, a professor emeritus from an important Israeli university. We knew each other by name but had never met.

After we had exchanged lighthearted small talk about the joys of retirement, his tone changed. "You know, Yossi," he said, "you and I are very different. You are identified with the right, and I am very leftist. I'm in favor of living with the Arabs. I taught many of them at university."

Leaving aside his assumptions about my political positioning for a moment, I broadly agreed with his central point about the benefits of integration, if they are followed through on both sides. He listened intently

and, after about half an hour's discussion, said, "You should be prime minister."

I laughed, thanked him for the compliment and said, "So, are you coming with me?"

He gestured toward his wife, who was trying to access a film on her iPad.

"Are you nuts?" he replied. "My wife would kill me . . ."

And there, in a nutshell, was our issue. You can sit there on your balcony, loftily observing others and bemoaning division and do nothing about it. Or you can do your best to deal with the cynicism of the political process, counter extremities of ideology and sacrifice your life for your fundamental beliefs.

I'm willing to die to ensure that Jewish people will never suffer, as they have suffered before. I see antisemitism and hate crime on the rise, alarmingly so in the year or so since October 7, 2023, but this is my jurisdiction. I understand what we are up against.

In practical terms, there are many nations, principally Syria, Iran, and Lebanon at the moment, Egypt and Jordan in the past, and others in Africa and around the world that insist, for reasons I cannot understand, that the state of Israel should cease to exist.

I'm Israeli. I'm Jewish. I'm a democrat. I'm liberal. I'm Zionist. I will do all I can to make sure that this desire for extermination does not prevail. Is this level of hatred justified? Do I hate them in the way they hate us? Of course not.

Live your life. Leave me alone, and I will leave you alone. I am not going to harm you, Syrian boy, just because you are Syrian. I haven't decided that Iran should be wiped off the face of the Earth, simply because of the wickedness of the mullahs.

To recap, other nations, under the banner of the United Nations, thought on November 29, 1947, that we should have a state. The so-called Partition Plan for Palestine signaled the end of the British Mandate by recommending the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states and a Special International Regime for the city of Jerusalem.

This was two years after the slaughter of six million of our people, in the Holocaust. This was after two thousand years of Jews being butchered, jailed, and chased around the world because of our faith and identity.

We thank God for the gift of our homeland. But those who have decided our lives are unimportant, and that we should die simply because we are Jewish, will face the consequences of that.

When I see someone conducting terror activity against Israelis, or Jewish people, anywhere on the planet, I'll chop his head off. No, you will not do that, you will not. You will stop, or I will stop you. That's not because I'm a bad boy. It is not because I'm an immoral guy. It is because *you* are. And your form of evil should be stopped.

So, I hear you asking, how precisely?

I appreciate the sanctity of secrecy. I will do nothing, in this book or in any other sphere of public life, to defy or threaten the conventions of the Israeli security process. I have the greatest respect for our operatives and will not subject them to unnecessary risk.

Certain operational details have to be excised, and individual identities must be shielded, for the common good. This is particularly important, since the Mossad has a history of establishing covert relations with countries that avoid overt contact with Israel.

Like other secret service agencies, or special forces units, around the world the Mossad operates on the basis of NCND, no confirmation, no denial. There is a phrase with which you will become familiar: "according to foreign reports." That's a running joke in the Israeli media. I am happy to allow others to speculate on supposed activities in the shadows. I deal in matters of substance.

There's a practical dimension to the principle. The world is quietly in awe of the Mossad's reputation. They believe we are the best and they are correct. Though the boundaries of what we do are blurred, there is a sharp focus on our myths and legends.

The unspoken threat that generates works in our favor. I want every scientist in Iran dealing with either missile capability, centrifuge creation, or any other nuclear platforms to be suspicious of strangers and fearful of their own shadows.

I want him to think twice when he hears a motorcycle in the street.

Hmm, that may be the Mossad. Hmm, that may be for me. True, that may be for you. I see you. Sorry to bring bad news, but I also hear you. I listen to what you say. I know what you are trying to hide. Even if you think that very few people in Iran know about it, I will be the next to know.

We will screw you down because we are the Mossad. We know you. We know where you live. We know your apartment number. We know your car. We know your movements. We know what you are working on, so be aware.

That's a good perception to create. Without admitting responsibility for anything not in the public domain, we are inside their heads. Their imagination is our asset. We are part of what they do, part of what they think. We are in their dreams or, to be more precise, in their nightmares.

Having said that, I truly believe that one of man's most important missions is to make peace. Anyone can create wars. I would love nothing more than the people, be they Israeli, Palestinian, or citizens from across the Middle East, to come together and set the agenda for their supposed political masters.

Since I'm a realist, and autocracies are incredibly difficult to undermine, that might not happen any time soon. But, like David Ben-Gurion, I am prepared to negotiate and compromise a little more to get what I wanted in the first place.

Ben-Gurion carried the greatest of burdens. As his fellow citizens danced in the street, following Israel's declaration of independence, the prime minister designate wrote in his diary: "I mourn in the midst of rejoicing. Will Tel Aviv be bombed tonight?"

He knew war was about to escalate. Israel's hostile neighbors were preparing to invade. Some of those celebrating wildly, in blissful ignorance of what was to come, would not survive the subsequent conflict.

Sometimes, a cold peace is better than a hot war. Hosni Mubarak, the autocratic Egyptian leader who ruled for three decades before his overthrow in 2011, worked according to that principle in keeping peace with Israel, curbing border tensions and maintaining domestic stability while enhancing what he believed to be Egypt's rightful place in the Arab world.

Though, as vice president, he accompanied his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, in a visit to Beersheba in May 1979, to mark the completion of the first phase of the Sinai evacuation, he visited Israel only once as president, for three hours to attend the funeral of assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

It was a delicate balancing act. He hosted Israeli prime ministers and foreign ministers for talks on the Palestinian issue, and fulfilled security agreements while courting Arab opinion by doing nothing else to normalize

relations between our nations. It was a means to an end that also enabled him to reduce the military budget, inflated by the need to prepare perpetually for the possibility of war with Israel.

Above all, he loved his country. He did everything in his power to sustain the peace treaty with Israel, signed by President Sadat, who was murdered in October 1981 by Egyptian Islamists in an attack that killed eleven and left Mubarak himself wounded. When Mubarak passed away, at age ninety-one in 2020, Benjamin Netanyahu expressed "great sorrow" and described him as "a leader who guided his people to peace and security, to peace with Israel."

I am a dedicated student of Cicero, the Roman scholar, statesman, lawyer, and philosopher who acted as consul in 63 BCE. He operated during a time of national instability, of civil war and dictatorship, but has built an enduring reputation through the powerful nature of his oratory and his forensic examination of the facts.

His observation that "an unjust peace is better than a just war" stands the test of time. He also said that "in times of war, the law falls silent." He was as good as his word, executing five leaders of an incipient revolution without trial.

His fate carries a warning. Though he campaigned for a return to traditional republican government, he was a victim of the power struggle following the death of Julius Caesar. Proscribed as an enemy of the state, he was executed after attempting to flee. Mark Antony, his mortal enemy, had his severed head and hands displayed publicly, in a final gesture of contempt.

Cicero's letters, and the transcripts of trials in which he participated, either as prosecutor or defense lawyer, represent an amazing legacy. He also provided one of the greatest reflections on the philosophy of leadership: "The higher we are placed, the more humbly we should walk."

That's why I admire leaders of great social vision and moral courage, like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. They were dignified, defiant, determined in the face of ignorance and persecution.

They were, in many ways, slaves to their ideals, but Mandela, in particular had a hidden steel. We remember him as this serene, saintly figure, the father of a multicultural South Africa, but one must not forget the

younger man, who traveled across the continent seeking support for armed struggle.

He abhorred violence, but, as he stressed, during his legendary three-hour speech at his trial at Rivonia in 1964, he was willing to use it to counter "tyranny, exploitation, and oppression." He believed freedom and justice were worth fighting and dying for. It seems hard to imagine, but he was on US terrorist watch lists until 2008.

The Torah, the scriptures that constitute our most sacred teachings, dedicates approximately one thousand verses to rules and descriptions of war, but Jewish law forbids the killing of innocent people, even in the course of a legitimate military engagement. If only our enemies felt the same way.

What, for instance, have we done to the Iranians, to make them hate us so? We have not conquered a single centimeter of Iranian soil. We even have a history of liking them; Ben-Gurion was a great advocate in the days of the shah. I've had members of the Sunni minority tell me, with no sense of irony, that they are genetically 30 percent Jewish.

We are back to the vision thing again. Theirs is distorted by religion and nationalism. How will such regimes and dogmas be judged by history? Badly, I suspect. Will the babies being born on both sides today grow up to fight each other like we are now? I pray they will merely ask, in puzzled tones, what was that all about?

I'm not trying to control anyone's life, however different we are in terms of creed, culture, and geographical location, but I am saying: prove me wrong. Deal with my arguments, cope with my logic. I will continue to do what I think is right, personally and collectively.

Counterterrorism is a filthy job, but there is a global motivation, and a local one, to pursue it. An Iranian nuclear capacity is not just an Israeli problem, it is an increasingly global problem. The Islamic Republic has the largest and most diverse arsenal of ballistic missiles, with a reported range of two thousand kilometers. That covers most of the Middle East.

The Iranian program at the Mossad goes back to the early 1990s, when Shabtai Shavit, then the director, gave precedence to developments in Iran. We suspected that the North Koreans were heavily involved, teaching the Iranians how to create their own missile program.

I was a very young operative at the time, when resources in the region were concentrated on assessing and combating Gaddafi in Libya, Assad in

Syria, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. We were disturbed that the Russians were selling advanced missile capacity.

Our operational activity in that area was scaled back, and reallocated, when we began receiving intelligence that the Iranians too were seeking access to weapons of mass destruction.

Being surrounded by nations with such capabilities was an existential threat that needed to be countered. My work, from a European base, began to be dominated by Iranian missiles and Iranian nukes. I had two priorities: information and infiltration.

Cooperation between hostile nations is a cause for alarm. Why were so many Iranian scientists traveling to North Korea? Why were so many North Korean officials traveling to Iran? It was a matter of joining the dots.

Fast-forward more than thirty years, to 2023, and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, using a New Year's address to order the "exponential" expansion of his country's nuclear arsenal and the development of a more powerful intercontinental ballistic missile.

Why will he get it? Because no one will stop him.

Even the most punitive sanctions have failed, and he doesn't care about the price his people pay. His idea of a great day out is to take his daughter, hand in hand, to a missile test in the casual way that you or I would take our children or grandchildren to the park or the playground.

By association, that potentially influences our right to be able to live in our small patch of the planet. I won't say live here forever, because I remember that the Romans, drinking wine in beautiful buildings while the Empire was being expanded by hundreds of thousands of soldiers, could not conceive of their decline and downfall, but I will say for centuries.

The use of our intelligence will always be more important than the intelligence itself. The Iranian leaders may describe us as an illegitimate Zionist regime, an American client state hostile to Muslims, but their bombast is ineffective.

Despite our conflict being popularly described as a proxy war, between Israel and Iran's terrorist allies, they need only to remember one reality. Don't dare touch my country.

Chapter 8

The Art of Seduction

There was something intriguing, something remote but inviting, about the man reading at the breakfast table in a Paris hotel. He wore elegant cufflinks on an immaculately ironed shirt and his suit was as clean and crisp as deep, freshly fallen snow.

He noticed the gaze of a neighboring diner, smiled politely, and returned to his book. He seemed keen to keep his distance but again, out of common courtesy, held eye contact and returned a friendly nod.

This seemed to embolden his neighbor, who rose, approached, and introduced himself as Farid, a delegate to a physics conference in the city. It was a fateful moment; in years to come Farid would appreciate his impulsive act of curiosity.

He made small talk, asking about the French-language book the man was reading. He knew of the author and struck up a discussion about his work. The man was courteous, if still a little diffident, but gradually began to open up, over coffee.

His name was Oscar. He was a Lebanese lawyer, living between Beirut and Paris, and traveling extensively on behalf of a portfolio of wealthy clients. That explained why he spoke several languages, though as he said, "None of them, very well. My accent in all of them is lousy."

They found they had common interests in the arts, which Farid loved, despite his work as a scientist. He joked that he was a frustrated painter and didn't seem at all concerned that he missed the morning session of his conference.

The pair had dinner that evening when Farid opened up about his background. He had supported the Iranian Revolution, and eventually

admitted he worked in a government-sanctioned program. He was reflective and gave hints of unhappiness.

Oscar met Farid several times over the next few days, when he introduced him to some of his clients. Weeks passed, and those clients enabled Oscar to help his newfound friend overcome some pressing financial problems.

In return, Farid gave advice about customs and contacts to a female friend of Oscar, who wished to bid for a contract in Tehran. He was handsomely rewarded for other such favors, to a wider social circle, over several months.

He began to suspect Oscar's increased interest in his activities, which the lawyer passed off as natural, given their tightening bonds, but continued to accept invitations to nightclubs, parties, and convivial dinners.

He was in way too deep when the charade ended.

I was Oscar. Farid was my recruitment object. He had reached his tipping point.

I felt that delicious feeling of surrender. It had been happening in front of my eyes. He offered relatively little resistance. He was mine, the first of many Iranians I turned. They are very brave individuals.

It was late 1992. This was a breakthrough moment in understanding the nature of the threat posed by Iran's development of a nuclear capability, mainly through what we learned of their centrifuge capacity. They were, to use a popular and vivid phrase, filling in the earth on their activities.

The Mossad's strategy, of concentrating on human intelligence at a time when other intelligence agencies used more remote methods of detection, was paying off. Other objects and other targets were being turned simultaneously by other collection officers.

Farid was working on a new, top-secret project, headed by a senior nuclear physicist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exclaimed, many years later, at the press conference in which he revealed Iran's nuclear archive, "remember that name."

Farid passed on blueprints for the manufacture of uranium-enriching centrifuges that had been sold to them by the head of Pakistan's nuclear project, Abdul Qadeer Khan, who became one of the world's most dangerous men by selling his expertise to the highest bidder.

I was the first to bring this information to Israel and, by extension, our allies in the West. It was a new twist on an old strategy, which had seen the

North Koreans giving Syria a nuclear capacity, just as the French had, in Iraq, in 1981.

In such circumstances you almost have to create a mind map of the people you want to recruit. There are hundreds of targets and, of course, you will not turn them all, but you must at least engage with them, because you need dozens of sources.

It is a delicate process, like building a house of cards. These people are not directly connected to each other but have overlapping spheres of influence. They are individuals with connections at the highest level in Iran.

Each source offers a distinctive insight. Remember, Iran is a huge country, covering 1.64 million square kilometers and stretching north to south from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Programs on a national scale are heavily localized, and you have to know what is going on in each one.

I was getting my hands dirty, engaging and recruiting. I loved the work as a field operator because it was dependent on understanding how a human being ticks. That has always fascinated me.

You have to make the target love you and, more than that, trust you.

You can't set a time frame on that process. With some people it is three months, with others longer. Just as in our personal lives, with our girlfriends or boyfriends, workmates or business contacts, there's no set plan, no one way to make that connection.

For an intelligence officer, study comes before engagement. Let's say I am researching Dr. Abadi, PhD. Can I speak to those who know him? Can I intercept what he is saying? Does he like bird watching or Monster Truck racing? Is he into money or women? Is he corruptible?

Is he a nationalist? Does he hate crime or is he a criminal? Does he hate the regime, or is he part of it? Is he religious or not? How does he play the game of life? I can take an educated guess at some answers, but need them all to develop the sharpest picture.

I don't hate him. He doesn't know who I am, so he doesn't hate me, for the time being at least. Sometime in the future he will. My cover stories vary, because they have to fit the context, just like Oscar, the Lebanese lawyer in Paris. I could be a leather trader, an academic, a specialist in ceramics, but I have to infuse each of those identities with my personality.

Success can never be guaranteed, but at the end of the day we want the target to know that we are Israeli, and we are the Mossad. Those who accept

that become the best sources, because of the connectivity to the mission. They don't need to go through the farce of wondering why a Lebanese lawyer wants to know what is in a nuclear bunker.

How does it all work? Let's create an imaginary target, Ahmad, a senior political journalist from Tehran. He is extremely well connected, and I hear he is a frustrated author. He wants to be known for his creative writing, rather than the leaden pieces of propaganda that appear under his name. He is one of my routes into the regime.

I become the organizer of a new literary festival in Geneva. I get in touch with him, inviting him to appear. Who's paying? We are, in Swiss francs, or US dollars, should he prefer. What's the aim? We are inviting writers from different backgrounds to see what unites them. We envisage a stimulating set of intellectual discussions.

This is where the cover story acquires another chapter. I go to an official body, for the sake of argument, the Geneva Academy of Authors, and ask them to host the festival. My PR and marketing directors accompany me to the meeting. They, of course, are Mossad colleagues.

I offer to pay all expenses, and fund a writing bursary in the academy's name, if they commit to lending their name to the event, and showcasing the logo for another of my initiatives, the International Writers' Institute. We agree to academy alumni presenting at the festival, and to other members being our guests.

Why do I do this? It is in memory of my late father, who struggled to be published. I still have some of his manuscripts in my attic. Ahmad is excited to learn that he will be among fifty of his peers. I tell him to ask for me on arrival, having sent him hotel details.

He is due to fly in from Istanbul.

The Mossad is with him twenty-four hours a day. He suspects nothing. I work the conference room, spreading my cover story, but pay Ahmad special attention. He has three great days and is flattered by the respect and attention he receives.

I invite him to a smaller, more select event. That's where I make my pitch. The institute has plans to expand in his region; there are many fine writers, in their native Persian language, whom we would like to showcase. Would he like to head it up for me? I am offering US $10,000 a month, for little more than a day's work, and an open door to the West.

It's not only about money. It can be about pride. If his pride is satisfied elsewhere, I will go deeper into his heart. I don't know anyone who needs nothing. It might take months, but bit by bit, he will become my best friend.

I ask him to consider writing a book, anonymously, if need be, about the Iranian political process. I mention one senior politician I would like to meet, as part of a personal project. He is my true target. Ahmad wonders why, but doesn't want to waste this opportunity. He has been seduced by easy money and the prospect of international acclaim.

He is ready for the gut punch of reality.

Can you crack someone's temple if the need arises? Not many can. At any one time, there are less than a hundred intelligence case officers in the field. I understand why people find what we do fascinating, and in some ways disturbing.

We confront the realities with new recruits to our organization. All undergo a long ethical session, in which we discuss our values and the practicalities of our work. There is no shying away from an unpleasant truth: you can end up killing someone.

Life is complicated. There is a strange contradiction; you can't be emotional in your work, but you use authentic emotion to help you do the job. You're on stage, the actor in the play. Depending on the circumstances, you cajole or console, laugh and cry with your false new best friend.

The target, the object, risks it all because he or she trusts you. Ultimately, the Iranians could hang Farid for what he did for me. Sorry to say, I don't get emotional about it. I'm sympathetic, but when you recruit someone, they know what you want, who you are and who you work for.

When, at the end of a long process, I tell my target to take me to his secrets, he calculates the risk. He faces up to the potential price of accepting gifts, money, favors. Ego and vanity can be dangerous.

In some cases, he withdraws his hand from the fire and refuses to do as you ask. He cannot carry it through. It's a point of crisis, something you cannot adequately train for because of the intensity of the emotions and the size of the stakes. It's a natural defense mechanism to project anger and disappointment.

"No, no, no, no. That's too much to do, as you say. Well, what else do you want? A pension fund? A $100,000 bonus?" Or, to take another tack, by attacking his character and sense of machismo, "Are you nuts? Are you

really worth nothing? I had faith in you. I offered you friendship." "No, you insult me." "You insult yourself."

It is still all a game, of course. It doesn't matter whether I like or dislike him. It is not important. I have walked hand in hand with Hezbollah terrorists, who have killed Israeli soldiers, to get what I wanted and needed. I hated it, but refused to allow them to see that, or sense my disgust.

If you come through the crisis and talk him around, shame him into action, you are wedded to one another. That's when the processes continue. Can you go to the Iranian embassy in Beirut, Mr. Terrorist, and find what I seek? Why? You are doing this for me.

You know he is yours. You know he will cry, he will throw up, and threaten to go home. He may even run away, back to Tyre, Damascus, Tehran, wherever, but the odds favor him coming back. Some don't, so you fold the mission and retrace your steps.

Not everyone is recruitable, though I have to assume they are, otherwise there is no point in making the approach. It is a little like making a business deal; there are ebbs and flows in negotiations, times when you fail just when you think you've cracked it. You live for the art of making that deal.

Some say they are not interested. "I know what you want, and you are not having me." They pour out their feelings—"I liked you; I dislike you. I thought you were a true friend; I feel used"—and the operation is over. In the words of the Paul Simon song, there are "fifty ways to leave your lover."

Spying is not immoral. It is for the sake of the country, in my case, Israel. Would you do it for the flag, the Stars and Stripes, the Hammer and Sickle, or the Union Jack? Would you act if your nation, your cherished way of life, was under threat?

Could you lie, cheat, conspire, for a greater cause? Do you have powers of observation and analysis? Could you be charming or threatening, to order? You never know, you might surprise yourself. We are all actors, to a degree.

Spying is arguably the second-oldest profession on Earth. Everyone does it, MI6, KGB, countries from Bulgaria to Botswana. It's a clinical, closed, and claustrophobic world.

Security services are trying to know each other well. They know me, know what we do, know what we're looking for. That's why they brief their own people before traveling. It's probably wise to be mistrustful. There's

not necessarily a lot of honor among thieves whose speciality is sensitive or significant information. If you are inside the Mossad, you are my colleague. If you are outside the organization you are regarded as my enemy.

Information is of fundamental importance to what we do, but we are now living in an age of disinformation. It goes way beyond learning about people from social networks, into an amazing world of invention and deception.

We use it. I can tell you a story that does not exist. I can create events that have never occurred. If it serves the purpose of my mission, it is justifiable. Of course, this can work against us. Our object, our recruitment target, may be doing the same thing.

That's why I will go to your friends: to check your authenticity and to ensure my assumptions about you are correct. I may even get someone to visit your house. Maybe you need someone to fix new kitchen taps. The plumber will be a colleague.

It is the work of a few seconds to plant a listening device, or tamper with the telephone. I will be able to monitor what you say to your wife, how candid you are when you discuss things with your friends and colleagues. If I want to check still further, I will accompany the plumber in disguise, as his boss, to check that he is doing a good job for you, as a valued customer.

Every intelligence agency briefs trusted members of the media, both national and international. The Mossad, traditionally, is very good at this.

As director of the Mossad, I didn't have a spokesman. I spoke for myself, knowing the parameters of our privacy policy. Managing the news is somehow easy and tough. It's easy when the media tells the truth. It's tough when they invent things, and then get crazy about the controversy that such inventions generate.

I've called reporters in those circumstances: "Who told you that? Because it is so far from the truth it is not funny."

"I dunno . . ."

There are so many layers of intelligence, but several major disciplines. We have covered human intelligence, the flesh-and-blood element of the business. Another is visual intelligence, what you see from above, through a combination of drones, aircraft, and satellites.

That aligns to the huge world of signal intelligence, where you listen to and read everything you can, to appreciate the fullest picture. You have to

be inside of rooms of the decision makers and the decision takers. You have to understand communications between them and those around the process.

You have to listen, to intercept whatever you can. I cannot tell you how specifically because it crosses a red line, but in my experience, the best method of infiltration is the recruitment of someone from within.

By using human, visual, and signal intelligence—our version of the three Rs, reading, writing, and 'rithmetic—you can cross-check what organizations are doing and how they interact with one another. The power channels of each nation are similar in structure, even if there are local variances.

Who reports it to the big boss? Let's call him Mr. President.

You want to know what the chief of staff is thinking, what the army is planning. You want to get into the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Security Council. There are other power bases, like Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which, as ideological defenders of the revolution, wields huge influence over foreign and economic policy.

There are subdivisions that must be assessed for their connectivity. Let's take the Iranian nuclear capacity, as an example. The air force has a role in the development and dissemination of the missile program. It supplies aircraft that can carry the bomb. The navy is the platform from which the missiles can be fired.

Dig deeper, and there are thousands of people doing different, but complementary, jobs to create that one bomb. There are the scientists and physicists who had an integral role in the nuclear program under the leadership of Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, may he rest in peace. One, a scientist called Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, cropped up several times.

There is a group redeveloping the Arak Nuclear Complex, which is comprised of a heavy-water reactor and an adjacent heavy-water production plant. This work is underpinned by an agreement with a foreign national nuclear corporation.

Many universities are partnering with the nuclear program, which consequently has access to research and expertise in a range of associated areas, ranging from composite materials to neutrons, which, along with protons, are subatomic particles found inside the nucleus of every atom.

Academia is globalized, offering opportunities for key Iranian officials to travel to Israel's closest allies, like the United States. The resulting

network of alumni and interlinked individuals can be potent.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the Iranian academic, diplomat, politician, and former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, received a PhD in nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1977. His thesis was on "Resonance Region Neutronics of Unit Cells in Fast and Thermal Reactors," which seems impressive to the layman, if a little ominous.

He was Iran's foreign affairs minister from January 2010 to August 2013, when he took up the leadership of the AEOI for the second time, until 2021. This brought him into contact with another MIT alumni, Dr. Ernest Moniz, who through his role as US secretary of energy from May 2013 to January 2017, was one of President Obama's closest advisers on nuclear issues, and the professional leader for the Joint Comprehension Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal overseeing Iran's nuclear program.

Dr. Moniz, who has the bearing of a British high court judge, has been an MIT faculty member for forty years. As director of the university's Laboratory for Energy and the Environment, he led on multidisciplinary technology and policy studies on the future of nuclear power. It is fair to say we disagreed on policy and principle.

It helps to have friends, or at least acquaintances, in convenient places.

Many names became familiar, in these interconnecting worlds. Dr. Fakrizadeh was mistakenly dismissed by Mossad intelligence officers, and others in the IDF, as a lousy manager, unworthy of interest, for too long. One of the things we learned from the Iranian nuclear archive was how sophisticated and smart he was.

Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, a lecturer in chemistry at Tehran's Sharif University and supervisor of a department at Natanz uranium enrichment facility, was killed in 2012 by a magnetized bomb. According to eyewitnesses, it was fixed to a Peugeot 406 in the northern part of the city by two individuals on a motorbike. The driver also died of his wounds, although the car remained virtually intact.

These are serious issues. It is a dangerous world. There are inherent risks in attempting to contact significant people in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The same applied in other nations, before the welcome institution of peace treaties.

You don't turn a Hezbollah terrorist into your best friend immediately on charm alone. You want your personality to percolate through his system,

so that he goes home to his wife and tells her that you are a nice, handsome devil.

He has to believe in what I say, trust I will follow through on my promises. Everything in the recruitment process is orchestrated and rehearsed. When I was head of the Mossad's Tzomet HUMINT division, the human intelligence division of the Mossad, I had hundreds of people working out minute details in an endless succession of meetings designed to make the field officer's life a little more simple and secure.

Why would you do that job? I suppose if you are reading this, then it is a fair guess that you are intrigued by my world. Ask yourself this: Is there a chance you could be recruited for the Mossad? You may think you are happy in your "normal" life, but I can make you happier.

I could show you a new life, a more meaningful life. If you are bored, I could show you a better, faster, more interesting world. I'll take you through the process. Then it would be down to what we call, in Yiddish, your kishkes, your gut feeling.

You have, of course, to be Israeli, but you can apply easily. To quote the Mossad website: "For swift and safe contact, we recommend contacting us via Facebook Messenger. Please write only in Farsi, Arabic, or English. Messages in other languages will not be read."

That's quite a leap for an organization that, for so long, preferred to be opaque. These days we even entice you in with a series of inspirational messages. You are invited to "join us to see the invisible and do the impossible."

David Ben-Gurion's observation that "history is not written, it is created" is followed by this quotation, from Shimon Peres, the eighth prime minister, and ninth president of modern Israel: "People with no fantasy cannot create the extraordinary."

So, I hear you saying, if it is that simple to volunteer, surely enemies or mischievous rivals in the intelligence community will try to circumvent the process, through a cover story. They can be detected.

The giveaway is the polygraph test that is designed to tell us who you really are. We see through the liars easily. We send them back to their handlers and managers, with flowers and a message that leaves no room for doubt.

Chapter 9

Tip of the Spear

It is a dark, cold night at the end of January. Snow, swirling in the faint amber glow of weak streetlights, blankets the industrial suburb of Shahrabad in southern Tehran. Before dawn, in a nondescript warehouse on a claustrophobically narrow street, Iran's filthiest secrets will be revealed.

I am a thousand miles away, watching real-time footage of the scene on multiple screens in the command center at Mossad headquarters in Tel Aviv. I sense the tension, see the fatigue, in the faces around me. None of us have slept for several days.

This is our last shot, our last chance to prove to the world that Iran's insistence that its nuclear program has a peaceful purpose is a grotesque lie. It has taken more than two years, and the efforts of hundreds of people, to be in a position to expose a campaign of concealment and disinformation.

Courage, creativity, cunning, and cutting-edge technology are the hallmarks of the Mossad, Israel's pivotal foreign intelligence agency, but truly great achievements, those which seem logically unattainable and unbelievable, require dynamic, diverse, and experienced teams, containing individuals of the strongest character, united by a shared goal.

These are my people. Some say I should not be so personal, presumptuous, or possessive, but from the moment I became Mossad director, on January 6, 2016, I wanted it to be personal. It was a different approach, but a fundamental aspect of my leadership. It was my time, my nation, my organization too.

I told my commanders that I wanted them to love their subordinates. I demanded that they dedicate themselves to them. I expected them to be crazy about their job. I encouraged them to feel the organization was theirs.

I needed them to understand that the most precious things in life are deeply personal. There would be no arguments, no exceptions, no wavering. I would consult widely and hopefully wisely, but I would not avoid my duty to accept the loneliness of leadership. I knew what I needed to do.

I took complete ownership of the responsibility that weighed so heavily that night, January 31, 2018.

I had only been director for a couple of days when I received an intelligence briefing that confirmed what I had long suspected. A sequence of strange events signaled that there was a massive operation underway, to collect, aggregate, clean, and consolidate materials capable of creating a nuclear bomb.

Hardware, software, computers, CDs, photographs, documentation, and other materials to do with military aspects of the nuclear program were being gathered from across the Iranian nation. Some were to be destroyed, as grievous evidence of previous wrongdoing, but most were to be stored and retrieved at a less politically sensitive time.

The so-called Iran nuclear deal, signed in 2015, contained sunset clauses allowing them to produce nuclear fuel again after 2030. It had suited the regime to halt its overt activity in 2003, but scientists were engaged in covert plans to continue several projects in secret, within existing military programs.

I was convinced the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, based in Vienna, were powerless, although they held the right to visit anywhere in Iran, within twenty-five days of making a request under the terms of an agreement I mistrusted. It is impossible to police sites you know nothing about.

Informers helped us to detect the regime attempting to rent warehouses in several districts of Tehran, under special restriction orders from the Ministry of Defense, which ensured a maximum of five individuals would carry the secret of the location of the proposed storage facility.

I knew the political dimension through my previous experience as national security adviser, and formulated a two-point plan. The first order was based on a primary principle of intelligence gathering. Don’t take your eye off the ball. It must never run away from you. We had to know everything about anything or anybody that moved.

Who are the people behind this? What do they do? Where is the warehouse, exactly? How is it guarded? What kind of CCTV do they have?

Are there safes? How many locks are there? What are the intricacies of the alarm system? Is it connected to somewhere in the city, so any breach can be countered with speed and overwhelming force? How many guards are there? Do they have dogs?

The second order was simple but took a lot of people by surprise: Get me the nuclear archive. Bring it home. Steal it in its entirety, rather than copy it, because in that event the Iranians would insist any materials were forgeries. With the archive in our hands, the burden of proof would be lifted.

I'm sure that at that point, some insiders thought I was mad. I had people asking me, "Yossi, are you serious?" I was extremely serious. This wasn't done on a whim or a misplaced notion of reckless adventure. It wasn't the product of an out-of-control ego.

I was investing a lot of time and effort, and risking people's lives, because I wanted the authorizing signature of Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of the nuclear program, in my hands. I wanted to smell the ink, see his fingerprints, and sense his despair at our discoveries.

My decision-making process involves three elements: vision, leadership, and action. Create, clarify, and communicate the vision. Provide compelling, convincing leadership. And then deliver determined, devastating action.

The stakes were high and the dangers all too real. I knew it would be super hard, an unprecedented coup. But Mission Impossible? In our world, there should be no such thing. I knew my organization and fully trusted my people.

More than thirty years previously, I had been a KATSA, an acronym for "collection officer." My role was to recruit live agents and operate actions. Nearly twenty years previously, I had worked under an inspirational director, Meir Dagan, to combine human intelligence with signal intelligence.

I called it HUGINT—that combination of human intelligence and signal intelligence. This was a complementary approach in which the actions of our agents on the ground dovetailed with an ever-developing cyber capacity that enabled us to learn about our enemy's technological capabilities.

Mossad is compartmentalized, with different divisions and subdivisions. I chose one of the operational divisions, because I had a huge appreciation for the capabilities of its commanders. I calculated, correctly, that the

mission should be entrusted to one of the heads of an underpinning unit, a super smart guy who had previously performed brilliantly in highly dangerous circumstances in Iran.

He would subsequently win, anonymously, the Israel Defense Prize, awarded annually by the president of Israel since 1958 for "significant contributions to the defense of the State of Israel." I gave mine to my parents when I won it. Their guidance and unstinting support deserved no less.

Iranian nuclear capacity, in the advanced development of a warhead and the potential for producing enriched uranium, represented an existential threat to our nation. We had to approach those involved in the movement of materials, to identify, film, and follow the shipping containers they were buying to support their officially sanctioned subterfuge. Bit by bit, we understood.

We followed the containers and defined their differences. Certain angles of sunlight highlighted a series of blemishes on its roof, like freckles on a fair-skinned individual. We nicknamed it "ginge," in honor of those who suffer from the sun.

Those spots were to become reassuringly familiar. They helped us to discover the initial storage site, a warehouse with a designated, strictly delineated zone housing three containers. We didn't know precisely what was in them, but surveillance of the area, and analysis of the movement of trucks, enabled us to understand their importance.

We intercepted communications, watched from the sky and the street. But then, in January 2017, the game changed. The regime suddenly moved the entire archive to another site in a different neighbourhood of Tehran, Shahrabad. Their need-to-know policy tightened still further, so even fewer individuals had the full picture.

We saw the containers leaving in a specific order. The first container was deemed to house the most valuable material, the second was of obvious interest to us, and the third was perhaps not as important.

We were back at square one, but the operation was unchanged. It was divided into two parts. The first was breach and steal, take the material away. The second concerned concealment of our trucks and people. We knew that, once it became clear the archive had been intercepted and plundered, we would be subjected to angry, murderous pursuit.

It was a new site, but we had to find answers to the same set of questions. Who is going to go in? How do they go in? How do they get out? Where do they go? How do they run away? How do they breach the safes we now know are inside the containers? What is the temperature inside? What forces do you use? How do you train the operatives? Where do you train them? What do they have to learn?

In order to execute an operation of this magnitude, you need hundreds of specialists in their field. It is about the accumulation of intelligence, the development of technical and technological support. It involves logistical assistance, the creation of false identities, the compilation of documentation that enables deception. And, of course, the skills of very capable operatives.

We built an X-site, an exact replica of the warehouse and the streets around it. It was in the middle of nowhere. No cell phones, no Israeli identity. Nothing to the naked eye or to attract a curious enemy.

More questions. Who would form the group of dozens of operatives who, with assistance from other colleagues and locally recruited agents, would enter the warehouse and carry out the mission? They were a mixture of men and women, not necessarily veterans of covert activity in Iran, but people who had proven themselves in the field.

We checked their guts, their bravery, their courage, their willingness to place their lives on the line. Some candidates fell short. But I had faith in the team that spent months poring over the models and learning their way around the streets of a hidden, counterfeit city.

It was a big site. We had everything we needed to plan the penetration: trucks, containers, authentic safes, replica warehouses guarded by big, angry, dogs. We needed a huge stock of supplies, from giant lock cutters to heavy-duty welding equipment.

It was time-consuming. The safes were originals, purchased by the Mossad. They were huge, some twenty feet in height. Forget about the old movie cliché, the safe cracker blowing on his hands and listening for a fateful click from the dial through a stethoscope that signaled he had cracked the code.

This was *Ocean's Eleven*, for real. Constant training provided key solutions. Our team would go in with blowtorches that burned to at least 1,100 degrees Celsius, enough, we calculated, to cut through the thirty-two safes we had discovered were in those three containers.

We thought laterally. It required a major effort to solve what could have been a major problem. We tried different methods before discovering one that resulted in what we were looking for, the front door of the safe exploding outwards.

Meanwhile, we had feet on the ground in Tehran. We watched, waited, and calculated. We studied behavior patterns, who came in and when, where they went, and in what numbers. We had to know the time restraints under which we would operate.

We had to monitor surrounding factories and buildings to identify any possibility of intervention and nullify any dangers. It was an industrial zone, with little overnight presence or activity, but we had to make sure the area was super quiet. One random act or incident could result in loss of life and liberty.

Gauging shift patterns of security staff in the warehouse, it became clear that we had between 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. to get what we wanted from the three containers. Our intrusion would be discovered around 7:00 a.m., when the daytime contingent of guards arrived, and we needed time to flee.

As things turned out, the team entered the warehouse at 10:00 p.m. and vacated the premises at 4:59 a.m., ending the longest six hours and fifty-nine minutes of my life and beginning another mental ordeal, as the exit strategy began to unfold.

There were so many strands to piece together. If I could have acted earlier, I would have done so, but with so much at stake risk had to be minimized and preparations maximized. Another curveball, though, instantly changed the dynamics of the situation.

Just as we were in the final phase of our buildup, we discovered the Iranians planned to move the archive to the third warehouse. The obvious assumption was that this would be better protected. We had no option but to intensify our efforts, because the new site would have been like Alcatraz, a place with different systems and more intensive security, beyond our reach for years, if at all.

I favored an immediate insertion, on the night of January 30, but the commander on the ground insisted his warriors were not quite ready. This is where experience, and trust in your people, becomes critical. I reluctantly gave approval for another twenty-four hours to ensure everything was in place. That would positively be our final opportunity.

The following night was operational life in the raw. We become used to its messiness, its mood swings and occasional nastiness, but this had a special frisson of nervousness and expectation. Our communications systems were sophisticated and discreet. I could see everything 24/7, from ground-level vantage points to satellite images and body-cam footage.

The weather added to the bleakness of the setting, but at around 9:50 p.m. that night several trucks appeared out of the snowstorm, carrying our operatives and their equipment. I saw the advance party emerge and start to climb the high walls.

They paused at the top, to take in the lay of the land. Everything was quiet, except for the yapping of the dogs. I was braced for the operation to begin in earnest but suddenly, silently and without warning, they descended back onto the street, returned to the trucks and moved away.

What could have spooked them? Why had they not carried out their orders? Our consternation was based on misdirected fear, since, once we contacted the team leader, it became clear that their caution was a result of their professionalism.

They had trained, endlessly, on the assumption of existing intelligence that they would find two small cars inside the compound, for logistical reasons. Instead, they spotted three. Since this challenged their brief, they decided to err on the side of caution, to abandon the reconnaissance, retreat and reappraise their plans with us.

Once reassured, they returned to the warehouse, penetrated the containers and got to work, which was supervised from the command control room. Breaching the safes was a mission in itself; once we had done so, it was a case of instant analysis and employment of priorities.

This was the beginning of the process, not the end. We quickly realized we only had time to investigate two of the three containers. We estimated their contents comprised in the region of fifty thousand documents, so it seemed obvious we could not take them all. Remarkably, we did so.

We followed progress through live pictures transmitted by the break-in team. They were opening files, filming them, and sharing images with us, so that our Persian-speaking intelligence officers and nuclear specialists could decipher them. Some provided evidence of years of clandestine work on atomic weapons, warhead designs, and production schedules. Others had less relevance.

A pattern emerged. Each set of files was color-coded, denoting a distinctive area of correspondence. I ordered the collection of the red and black files, which contained invaluable information, but the tension was unrelenting.

I disguised my worries and, as if to prove there are no certainties in our business, to our surprise and delight, one of the safes revealed a huge basket containing hundreds of computer discs and CDs. Our attention was seized by evidence of the detonation of a massive consignment of TNT in a hole in the deepest part of the Iranian desert.

I had to think on different, interconnecting levels. I had to prepare for the inevitable pursuit, and oversee the immediate duplication of incriminating documentation, in case of capture. It could be copied onsite, sent back electronically or burned onto a CD that would be easier to hide.

Finally, at 3:29 a.m. Tel Aviv time, 4:59 a.m. in Tehran, I was able to brief Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that we had stolen what we wanted: 55,000 pages of documentation and 183 compact discs, on which were another 55,000 files, including memos, videos, blueprints, and strategic plans. I counseled that it might take months to get some of the materials out, but we had struck gold.

I didn't have time to get emotional. That's a luxury I indulge only when I see the results of an operation, and I know that my people are safe and sound. I hug each one of my operatives before they embark on a mission and hug them when they return. I never get blasé about the perils of their work, and the potential sacrifice they will make, because I put them in harm's way.

The threat was profound since events had unfolded exactly as we anticipated. Once the break-in was discovered, the Iranian security system went into meltdown. We anticipated the shock of the guards and the anger of senior figures, who were summoned to the scene. Local reports suggested that the supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, had described it as a national disaster.

Tens of thousands of policemen, detectives, intelligence officers, and members of the Revolutionary Guard were on our case. Flights were halted, and the transport infrastructure became gridlocked. There were barricades and roadblocks. People were stopped for random questioning. CCTV footage from shops and supermarkets, kiosks and traffic management systems, was studied frantically for clues.

Who has done this? Where did they go?

As hard as they looked, they could see no one. We had used our two-hour window of opportunity effectively, by opening several different escape routes. It is hard to hide half a ton of material, transportation, and twenty-five operatives in the heart of Tehran, so different people went different ways, to certain staging posts and safe houses.

They were unrecognizable as a team, unconnected by identity, communication, nationality. They were at huge risk, answering questions about who they were, where they had been, and what they were doing in Iran. We had to use all our operational capabilities to smuggle them out of the country.

Ultimately, no one was caught. Not a single CD, memo, or secret plot was left behind. We took the precaution of splitting materials and widened the arc of escape. We used disinformation to put our pursuers off the scent.

Our people were remarkably cool, clever, and courageous. One walked around with a form of USB that stored three terabytes of the archive, hidden on his person. That takes balls of steel, iron, or titanium, whatever is the strongest. You choose.

I also took heed of the old English proverb that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Roughly defined, that means it is better to secure a small, guaranteed advantage than to take the risk of aiming for something more attractive, which may come to nothing.

I desperately wanted, and ultimately received, the original materials, but took the precaution of asking the team to continue copying material and sending it back, but thank God the operation was beautiful, complete, and totally successful.

There are some aspects of the operation that I cannot reveal. It could be counterproductive because, as a wise man once said, “never poke your thumb in the eye of the enemy.” The Iranian public knew what we had done. They had seen the panic and heard rumors of casualties the regime had no interest in confirming.

We guard our secrets jealously, and very successfully, in the Mossad. If this operation had not come into the public consciousness, through our prime minister, in a dramatic and fully justified press conference, it is likely that the wider world would remain ignorant of how it transpired, and what it achieved. There have been many major missions that no one knows about, even though suspicion is rife and foreign reports contain fascinating detail.

My dear friend and counterpart Mike Pompeo, the former CIA director who became US secretary of state, was extremely generous in his assessment of our personal and professional relationship in his 2023 book, *Never Give an Inch*. He recalled one encrypted call from me, taken on his personal aircraft soon after his arrival in a European capital.

It followed what he described as "one of the most significant clandestine operations ever conducted." He offered help, "no questions asked, whatever the risk," if any agent required assistance in being extracted safely from enemy territory.

He remained an influential ally, when Bibi Netanyahu conducted what he admitted was "the most important press conference of my life" following a private briefing with President Trump. That description was no exaggeration. The revelations contained in that press conference were made on April 30. On May 8, the president withdrew the US from the nuclear agreement. The time frame tells the tale.

Bibi was helped in framing his address by Mossad's key nuclear experts, but spoke powerfully and convincingly. The image of him on the podium, in front of a white screen proclaiming "Iran Lied" in large black lettering, is indelible. His revelation of a secret mission statement, to design, produce, and test five warheads, each with a ten-kiloton TNT yield for integration on a missile, took the breath away.

If you have something that is central to your cause or your argument, you get to the top of the highest building you can find and start shouting. Mike Pompeo heard every word: "What this means is the deal was not constructed on a foundation of good faith or transparency. It was built on Iran's lies."

Geopolitically, it was the most important operation we had done. Public disclosure enabled us to give a full debrief to the IAEA inspectors. I gave copies of the archive to Mike, to Alex Younger at MI6, and briefed the heads of intelligence in France, Germany, Russia, and China.

Once this process was completed, Bibi Netanyahu was able to reveal to the United Nations general assembly that there was a second facility, a secret atomic warehouse in the Turkuzahbad district of Tehran. To ram home the point to delegates, he flourished a large color photograph of the site.

I also appreciated the impact of academic verification, and while on a speaking engagement in the United States, I invited six scholars from the

renowned Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard to Tel Aviv.

The scholars, who specialized in intelligence and the management of atomic issues, were initially skeptical. We allowed them to examine samples of the archive, showed them photographs of the interior of the warehouse, and gave them briefings from the Mossad's top intelligence officers.

Their subsequent report, titled "Impressions and Implications," was amazing in its insight, fairness, and rationally delivered support. It concluded that Iran's senior leadership "approved a program to manufacture nuclear weapons and carry out an underground nuclear test. This was a coherent, organized, top-down program, not a rogue operation."

It warned that "Iran possesses knowledge and capabilities that provide a foundation for reconstituting its nuclear weapons program," and confirmed that the regime had "engaged in a protracted covert effort to develop nuclear weapons whose full extent was undetected for an extended period."

The evaluation of results extended over thirty-six pages. It was a perfect overview that, crucially, was delivered from their perspective, not mine. It didn't assuage those who had criticized us for allowing too much light in, but frankly, I didn't care. An important battle in the war for peace had been won, and the campaign continued.

Like all wars, it had a human dimension, touched on by the prime minister's praise for the "hidden heroes you will never know about." He was, of course, referring to those who had operated in the shadows in Shahrabad.

I made sure I met them, on their return. It was an emotional moment. I felt close to each and every one of them. I could summon images of them in different scenarios; training in that godforsaken hole, scaling the walls, and making good their escape.

On their home streets they are camouflaged by apparent normality. Forget the spy thriller staple, of the operative on assignment, feigning disinterest behind a newspaper in a sidewalk café. They're the stranger you see on the Metro, the apparent shopper staring into a well-stocked window.

They are phantoms, for a good reason. When you are a Mossad operative in Iran, you have to survive in any way you can. Viewed from a distance, and without intimate knowledge of the driving forces of these special human beings, it's crazy what they have been able to accomplish.

They are the best of the best, the tip of the spear. It is my privilege to know them, and to have been their commander.

Chapter 10

Man in the Mirror

I have spent much of my professional life nameless, faceless. I was a ghost, never to be seen and unable to be heard. I was invisible, a breath of wind in human form. No one knew precisely what I did, or why I did it. For all intents and purposes, Yossi Cohen was a myth, a whisper, an invention.

I didn't need credit or gratitude. I didn't want flattering profiles in the great newspapers and magazines of the world. I had an inner motivation. My satisfaction came from the intensity of my work. Its importance outweighed the need for accolades and acknowledgments.

All I needed, each morning, was the mirror test, the same test I encouraged my subordinates to take, to ensure they were rooted and ready to act. As I told them, don't ask me who you are, ask yourself who *you* are. The mirror does not lie.

I would stand in front of different types of mirrors, in countless rooms on various continents, and ask myself, *Are you real, or fake? Have you done right, or have you done wrong? Can you be better, or are you cheating? Remember, my friend, the only person you can't cheat is yourself. You are not as good as you think you are*.

I know who I am. I don't need anyone to point out my faults or praise my strengths. To quote Friedrich Nietzsche, one of my favorite philosophers: "No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life."

Leaders learn from other leaders, but I have always appreciated the intangible guidance offered by great thinkers. I inherited Nietzsche's belief in the principle of self-creation: "We want to become who we are—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves."

There have been times when some of his observations have been particularly pertinent: “Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster . . . for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”

How many of us are securely connected to our personalities? Very few, in my experience. Do we attach enough importance to developing a certain level of understanding of ourselves? Not many of us do, it seems. Too many seek the easy answer to the deceptively casual question: “What do you think of me?”

I don’t have many regrets, professionally at least. I often discuss my work-life balance with those closest to me, but it doesn’t really exist. I am extremely lucky to have my wife, Aya, who like me understood the task, the mission, the need.

I was left alone, in a way, to do my stuff, so I invested in my work, and gave it 200,000 percent of my time. I was ready to risk everything. Taking the risk, taking the lead, traveling constantly, had a high price. I wasn’t present much as a father. I missed birthdays, special occasions in the kindergarten and other events as my children grew up.

I did my best to be with my kids and family when I could, and never took a holiday without them. But I wouldn’t do anything differently, given my time again. When I say no regrets, I mean it. It is not an empty, thoughtless phrase, a comforting excuse to ease my conscience. My life became my job the moment the Mossad called.

I wasn’t the sort of kid who was fixated by spy stories. My heroes didn’t live in the shadows. I didn’t even think such a life was possible. But once they approached me, oh my God. It was as if they had switched on an electric current that surged through my body.

The organization was my life from the age of twenty-two until I was sixty. I didn’t hide my motivation or ambition. I could not countenance anything less than constant success and promotion, and my eventual installation as the number one.

As I mentioned earlier, my wife tells me that even in the very early days I told her that I wanted to be the director of the Mossad. I don’t remember that, but I felt it. I was driven to do more, to take additional responsibility. I wanted to be a commander, and then to be the commander of the commanders.

There was no public acknowledgment of my progress, outside the organization, but that was an irrelevance. I tried to grow as a person, within the constraints of privacy. I took onboard the observations of other philosophers like Albert Camus, who, like Nietzsche, is considered an existentialist.

Camus was also influenced by the ancient Greeks, whom I found illuminating and fairly simple to read, and was committed to individual moral freedom and responsibility. Three things he said rang particularly true. The first—"You cannot create experience. You must undergo it."—summarized my belief in action over theory. Just get out there and do it.

The second hinted at the underpinning importance of unity in our small, fiercely independent and perpetually vulnerable nation: "Freedom is not a gift received from a State or a leader, but a possession to be won every day by the effort of each and the union of all."

The third related to the religious aspects of my nature: "I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live as if there isn't and to die to find out that there is."

I remained in touch with my first spiritual leader, Rabbi Haim Drukman, until his death at age ninety in December 2022. He had contracted COVID-19 for the second time and left a huge political and religious legacy.

He was often a controversial figure, on the conservative wing of the Zionist movement, and was an implacable believer in the sanctity of the biblical land of Israel. He helped found Gush Emunim, an ultranationalist, Orthodox group committed to establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights.

As a perennial power broker, a Knesset member, a deputy minister, and a mentor to religious politicians, he has left an enduring influence through several of his other students, former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, former general Benny Gantz, who served as minister of defense, minister of justice and deputy PM as well as former Chief of the Israel Police Yohanan Danino.

Like many of his generation, he was deeply impacted by the Holocaust. He was smuggled into what was then Mandatory Palestine in 1944, posing as the child of another set of parents. It was not until after the Second World War that he was reunited with his mother and father, who had spent years in hiding.

I spent time with his family during shiva, the week-long mourning period in Judaism that follows burial. They reflected his values, from his faith to his humanity. He was married to Sarah for sixty-five years; they had nine children, including an adopted disabled daughter.

As the rosh yeshiva, the dean of Yeshivat Or Etzion, my state-religious school, the rabbi saw something in me that others did not. In truth, I did not care too much for studies and had the usual teenage passions of dancing, cigarettes, and football. Some wanted to kick me out, but he saw, according to his personal testimony about my nonconformity, the signs of a natural leader.

Even at such a young age, a giant like Rabbi Drukman made me think about what leadership means. It is not a selfish, egotistical concept. I always told my subordinates not to concentrate on their rank: their troops or operatives already knew their status and powers. Leadership is about stressing what you can do for your followers, rather than the other way around.

As the boy he nurtured grew into a man, his belief in those three pillars —the people of Israel, the land of Israel, and the Torah, our bible—was repeated until it registered. These were the principles he expected me to live by and to work for.

Ever the politician, he never publicly admitted that we corresponded privately as I rose through the ranks, but he would often scold me for my behavior. In my mind, he remained this imposing figure, preaching moral values from on high, behind a wooden dais.

He wanted me to be a better Jew, a better Israeli, a better son, a better friend. He believed in the cleansing process of the Days of Awe, also known as the Days of Repentance, which stretch from our New Year, Rosh Hashanah, to Yom Kippur, our holiest day.

It was a time of serious self-reflection, in which I was expected to consider my mistakes of the previous year before showing penitence. It helped inform everything I did. He was my *chaver*, my constant companion.

A leader has to have a very deep understanding of himself and the philosophy he lives by. You can’t just get out there and lead. It’s not like an aircraft, where you sit in the cockpit and engage autopilot. It’s not like a keyless modern car, where you push a button and the engine starts.

You must know who you are, what you represent, what you want to say. You have to be aware of what is behind you, and what is in front of you. It is not merely knowing where you want to go. You must be mindful of where you came from.

How do you want to direct those under your command? What's your end game? What are the goals you wish to share? Be humble enough to appreciate that your views are not sacrosanct, and that others have different opinions that must be taken into account.

Sustaining your original vision involves concession and compromise. That's impossible without self-discipline and a sense of perspective. You need determination of purpose; once the vision has been clarified, it must be pursued with single-mindedness and vigor.

Above all, you have to be human. Being a leader does not give you superpowers; it doesn't infer that you deserve special privileges, to go with the inevitable pressures. Ultimately, you are a servant, rather than a superior being.

Power by its nature does not necessarily corrupt, but if you cling on too long in the belief you are invulnerable, you invite trouble. Never think you are the only savior in town. That confidence verges on arrogance. It corrupts the soul and saps the spirit of those around you.

I believe in collective reflection, going beyond the elite, so that as many people as possible can understand what you are trying to achieve. I broadened my cabinet while I was in charge of the Mossad; instead of having three or four extremely senior figures discussing important matters, I invited between twenty-five and thirty into the room.

Some asked whether such inclusivity was necessary. I explained it wasn't a snub to the highest-ranking officials, even though some might privately have been bruised. I wanted the wider group to be my messengers to the rest of the organization, so there was a bigger buy-in to our policies, and a greater awareness of what they would require.

It's simple math, really. If those thirty people share their knowledge and understanding with twenty others, that means six hundred people are engaged. If those six hundred tell ten others, that means six thousand people have been brought closer, into the circle of trust.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Second World War military commander who rose to become the thirty-fourth president of the United States, observed that "there are times, of course, when every leader must make a decision

and see that it is carried out regardless of what others may think. But whenever men can be persuaded rather than ordered, when they can be made to feel that they have participated in developing the plan, they approach their tasks with understanding and enthusiasm."

His relationship with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was pivotal in war and peace. Eisenhower saw him as "a persuader" whose skill "in the use of words and logic was so great" that when they disagreed on "some important matter when I was convinced of the correctness of my own view, and when the responsibility was clearly mine, I had a very hard time withstanding his arguments."

He added a vital caveat: "If the decision went against him, he accepted it with good grace, and did everything in his power to support it with proper action. Leadership by persuasion and the wholehearted acceptance of a contrary decision are both fundamentals of democracy."

Eisenhower believed Churchill embodied the requirements of a leader: "vision, integrity, courage, understanding, the power of articulation, and profundity of character." In my view, combine those qualities with operational excellence, emotional intelligence, humility, and humanity, and you can do great things.

As head of the Mossad, I concentrated on the precision of the vision, which went beyond immediate priorities in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and their associated terrorist organizations. I had to figure out what underpinned our actions, trace everything back to God's gift of the land of Israel.

It's too easy to fall into the trap of thinking there is nothing new in the world. Things inevitably evolve; you have nonnegotiable beliefs, but the world changes around you. Even amid difficulties and desolation, there are small signs of hope.

The internet and social networks are a double-edged sword. They enable the dissemination of evil principles like Nazism, but the visibility of such actions simultaneously highlights their danger, so they can be countered.

There is nowhere to hide. There is a pressing need for compromise, but Russia cannot simply invade Ukraine and expect the world to look the other way. We are influenced by eyewitness accounts of public defiance in Iran, of brave people pushing against the edifice of a wicked regime. China's repression of the Uyghurs has become a global talking point, instead of an invisible act.

I'm not speaking about inner turmoil, the sort of localized upheaval in countries like Syria that have a consistent cost in human life, but before October 7, and with the exception of a logically unwinnable, defensive war in Ukraine, the world was relatively quiet. Latin America, or LatAm as we call it in my trade, is pretty peaceful. Africa, in 2025, is dealing with a number of non-international conflicts, especially in the Central African Republic and Sudan.

Yemen's civil war has raged since 2014, displacing 4.5 million of its citizens and bringing to the fore a new global threat in the Iranian-backed Houthis, who control the capital Sanaa and most of the north of the country, but in terms of one nation attacking another, flashpoints are relatively rare. We are in a new era, which features the competing forces of globalization and deglobalization.

We in Israel are in the midst of a fundamentally important armed struggle, but in global terms, everything pales alongside the existential threat of climate change. That is going to render humanity extinct one day, for sure, if individual habits and governmental priorities do not change. As a race, we must start to behave differently before it is too late.

That's why I spend a lot of my time these days working in the field of renewable energies and related initiatives. Extreme weather events are accelerating, and we shouldn't need confirmation from NASA scientists that the Earth's surface is warming. It is the lived experience of every one of us.

Now more than ever, we need leaders with foresight and fearlessness. They must be fired with principle and an awareness of the common good. When I look to our formative figures in Israel, I see three outstanding examples of the type: David Ben-Gurion, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and Menachem Begin. Each inspired me, in his own way.

Ben-Gurion was the best leader in my lifetime. He arrived in Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire, from Poland in 1906 as an idealistic young man named David Gruen, "feeling well, full of courage, and full of faith." He changed his name four years later, having taken it from one of the Jewish generals who led the revolt against the Romans.

An often turbulent but consistently righteous figure in the three decades that followed, he was an incisive negotiator who had the gift of seeing things from his opponent's perspective. This was the key to the creation of a government that reflected the Jewish character of the new state of Israel while ensuring it was a democracy rather than a theocracy.

He brought the Orthodox community on board by confirming that Shabbat would be the official day of rest, that government kitchens would serve kosher food, and that religious demands, in areas like marriage, divorce, and conversion to the Jewish faith, would be respected.

His promise of an autonomous education system was carefully balanced. He guaranteed the state would not intervene in religious education but demanded the inclusion of history, grammar, and science in the curriculum.

He had proved, during long years of activism and resistance, that he had the determination to pursue his vision, but the scale of his ambition was stunning. He oversaw a range of national projects that resulted in the rapid development of our nation, and its people.

Some, like Operation Magic Carpet, the airlift of Jews from Arab countries, were deeply symbolic. Others, like the establishment of new towns and cities, rural development projects and the construction of the national water carrier, were practical statements of nationhood.

He died in December 1973, but lives on through our Scroll of Independence. It is a beautiful document, which affects our life even today. I live by its values, even though two significant words—"God" and "democracy"—are absent. I can recite its declarations by heart. This passage, to me, is a timeless statement of intent:

"The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

The document had a little ambiguity, to appease some religious sensitivities, but, like the American Declaration of Independence, it enshrined the right of the people to control their own destinies, free from legislative interference and despotic threat. The word "democracy" might not feature, but it continues to reflect our modern democracy.

I shudder to think what modern lawyers would do with it, given the chance, but I wouldn't change a single thing about it, even though the

original objective to institute a constitution was postponed indefinitely in June 1950. There is something permanent about its concluding proclamation of faith in the rock of Israel, the "Zur Israel," to use the Jewish term.

It is a remarkable example of clear-sighted, strong-willed leadership, because it was signed in the knowledge that the new nation would soon be at war. Ben-Gurion ensured the scroll was immediately secured in a safety deposit box in a local bank.

Some of the signees were in Jerusalem, which was blockaded and without electricity. Few there heard the first prime minister's recitation, and the playing of the "Hatikvah," the Hope, Israel's national anthem, which takes, as its spirit, nineteenth-century Jewish poetry. Ben-Gurion was truly forged in the fire; bombing of the outskirts of Tel Aviv by the Egyptian Air Force began within eight hours, signaling the start of the Independence War.

He wasn't a saint. He had a vengeful nature, and loathed Jabotinsky because of his links to the Hatzohar, the Revisionist Zionist Alliance, a movement that sought new ways to deal with British rule in Palestine.

Jabotinsky did not live to see the birth of the state of Israel, dying of a heart attack while visiting a Jewish self-defense camp in New York in 1940. His remains were returned to his spiritual home in 1964, against Ben-Gurion's wishes. He rests eternally alongside other deeply respected Zionist leaders like Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin, in Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, the site of our national cemetery.

Born Vladimir Yevgenyevich Zhabotinsky in Odessa in October 1880, he is regarded as the godfather of Israel's center-right Likud Party, formed in 1973 by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon. He was held in solitary confinement for two months in 1902 by the Russian authorities for supposedly seditious activities as a young journalist.

He changed his name (Ze'ev means "wolf" in Hebrew) the following spring, in response to Russian pogroms, and began to devote himself to the cause of a Jewish homeland. He was, in many ways, a contradictory character, a lyrical writer who understood the strategic impact of violence, but no one could doubt his courage or his commitment to his followers.

He created the Jewish Legion, fighting with the British Army in the First World War, and became an honorary lieutenant in the 38th Royal Fusiliers during combat in Palestine, but was demobilized after complaining

to Field Marshal Allenby, who led the campaign against the Ottoman Empire, about its attitude toward Zionism.

His heroism was rewarded in 1919, when he was awarded the MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire), largely for his military service in the Gallipoli campaign, and subsequent actions in Platoon 16 of the 20th Battalion of the London Regiment. Yet, within months, following riots in Jerusalem, he was public enemy number one.

The British found guns and ammunition in a building used by the defense militia, fashioned by Jabotinsky from young, idealistic migrants from Europe, and arrested nineteen men. He confronted the police the following day, protesting that, as the men's commander, he was solely responsible for their actions and they should be released.

He was immediately arrested, and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment, but, like his men, who were each sentenced to three years' incarceration, he was quickly pardoned and released in a general amnesty. Such selflessness, and disregard for personal welfare, marked him as a principled, courageous leader.

His writings, which promoted the vision of a liberal, modern, democratic state of Israel, strong enough to defend itself, were profound. He believed in equality and insisted on the importance of living peacefully with our neighbours, and citizens of different faiths, but he did not trust in the status quo.

He formed the Zionist Revisionism Party after writing his 1923 essay, "The Iron Wall," in response to the prohibition of Zionist settlement on the east bank of the Jordan River by Winston Churchill, the British colonial secretary. He argued the only solution to achieve peace would be for Jews to first establish a strong Jewish state in the Land of Israel. This, he felt, would eventually encourage a more moderate Arab leadership to become more open to "mutual concessions."

A week after he published the original essay, Jabotinsky released "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," in which he argued that morality is paramount. He depicted Zionism as "moral and just," since it promotes "national self-determination" as a "sacred principle." It was met by opposition from across the domestic political spectrum.

In 1931, he formed the Irgun, the underground paramilitary force that believed in active, armed response to Arab forces. That brought him into contact with Menachem Begin, who became his protégé, and forged links

that carry through to the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, whose father, Benzion, was Jabotinsky's personal secretary and historian.

Such networks reflect the size and intimately linked nature of Israeli society: the midwife who attended Begin's birth was the grandmother of future Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, another polarizing figure regarded as a war criminal by Palestinians but revered as a national hero in Israel.

Begin shaped the Irgun in his own flinty, aggressive image, and was branded by the British as a terrorist, despite his subsequent eminence and prominence as a politician. His studies of the Irish War of Independence between 1919 and 1921, and the Indian independence movement convinced him of the necessity and effectiveness of guerrilla action.

Like many great leaders, Begin was shaped by tragedy and adversity. His father, Ze'ev Dov, a timber merchant and passionate Zionist, was among five thousand Jews rounded up by the Nazis and shot or drowned in a local river in Brest (Belarus) in June 1941. His mother, Hassia, the descendant of a long line of distinguished rabbis, and his elder brother, Herzl, also were murdered in the Holocaust.

He had fled Poland, soon after the German invasion, and regrouped in Wilno, a town with a sizable Jewish community, which would become Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. It was soon occupied by the Soviet Union, whose secret police accused him of being "an agent of British imperialism" and had him tortured in the infamous Lukiškės Prison.

He was sentenced to eight years in the Soviet gulags but was released in the summer of 1941. He joined the Free Polish Army and served in Palestine and the Persian corridor before throwing himself into the leadership of the Irgun. He had no time for the fripperies of rank; a humble man, he dressed frugally and cared little for material things.

His ideals sustained him for three decades in political opposition, which ended when he was elected prime minister in 1977. He hosted Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in his historic visit to Jerusalem later that year, and in 1979, after lengthy negotiations, signed the peace agreement with Egypt in Washington.

That earned him the Nobel Peace Prize, along with President Sadat, but he was typically unafraid of conflict. He ordered the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, and launched Operation Peace for Galilee, designed to destroy the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure in Lebanon the following year.

He resigned as prime minister in September 1983, following his wife's death, and lived in seclusion until he passed away in March 1992. He is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. An inspirational generation died with him.

Men like Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky, and Begin fought for their nation with their heart and soul, body and mind. They did their best to shape the state of Israel and were prepared for the brutality of the struggle. They never lost their faith. Their *neshama*, their spirit, was strong.

So, too, was that of the Mossad director to whom I owe everything, Meir Dagan. He placed a dagger between our teeth. My wish was to be a leader of that kind. I hope I fulfilled it.

Chapter 11

Force of Nature

Our pain as Jews may be skimmed by the sands of time, but it remains powerful and profound. It acts as a reminder of what was, and what could be again if we ease our habitual vigilance. It is captured by two photographs, widely shared, but deeply personal.

Those images depict the last moments in the life of Rabbi Ber Erlich Sloshny, Meir Dagan's maternal grandfather. They hung in his office, as director of the Mossad between 2002 and 2011, as a token of timeless inhumanity.

In the first his grandfather is standing, surrounded by eight grinning SS officers, two of whom are playing contemptuously with his traditional side locks. In the second, he has had his head roughly shaved to emphasize his humiliation. He is on his knees with his arms raised, staring hauntingly, almost sightlessly, as he waits to die.

His murderer, the man who shot him and ensured the body was thrown into a mass grave in the family's hometown of Luków in eastern Poland, is probably one of three greatcoated Nazi Germans in the frame. One looks proudly into the lens of the camera, which had been given to a local resident, a non-Jew, with orders to record the scene as a grotesque souvenir.

The soldiers forgot to take the film with them. It remained undeveloped until, by a remarkable coincidence, Dagan's father was given it by the unwilling photographer when he returned to Luków with the intention of erecting a monument to the victims of the extermination of the local Jewish community.

Dagan was a child of the Holocaust, born on the floor of a cattle truck, as it passed through the Ukrainian port of Kherson on his parents' return journey from Siberian exile to Poland at the end of the Second World War.

He lived in a transit camp on arrival in Israel in 1951; the family was then housed at an overcrowded former British army base.

We spoke at length about the enduring impact of persecution, the scouring of his parents' souls by poverty, fear, and deep-seated grief. He never forgot how scarred they were by the experience of fleeing for their lives from the Nazis and returning to discover the deaths of so many family members.

It was a fundamental influence on his own life, dedicated as it was to the defense of the state of Israel. That's why he made a point of showing Mossad operatives those two photographs of his grandfather.

They imparted a simple but fundamental message: never again.

History, to him and to so many of us, was not an academic exercise. Our psyches are shaped by thousands of rootless years, running between nations. Some were good to us, most were not. The crusades, pogroms, and inquisitions led to the Holocaust, the most terrible fate to befall the Jewish people.

Meir Dagan was seized by the spirit of resistance. He reasoned that now that we finally had a country, we had a duty to guard it. He did that, and so much more. When he died, of cancer in March 2016, at age seventy-one, it was my duty, in my early days as Mossad director, to pass on the "deep grief" of everyone in the organization.

I felt a huge sense of personal loss. He had paid my family the greatest possible tribute by asking me to supply a photograph of my son, Yehonatan, so it could be hung alongside those of his grandfather. It depicted him in his IDF uniform, on his first day at the recruitment center, as a volunteer in a wheelchair. It was Dagan's salute to a young man who has overcome so many obstacles in life. One of my biggest regrets is that I never took a photo of the three images, together on that wall.

His gesture did not reflect the ferocity of his approach, but it did signal something very special between us. How do I know that he appreciated me? It is a big question, without a simple answer. All I do know is that he was the greatest influence on my approach as a commander, and a pivotal figure in the organization's evolution.

When Dagan was nominated as director of the Mossad by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, I knew nothing about him. I was not alone. We were all rushing around, saying, "Who is this guy?" We did not have to wait long

to find out. He was a force of nature. He came into the Mossad like a storm. It was amazing.

Sharon had been impressed by his impulsive bravery more than thirty years earlier, when he commanded him in a newly formed, highly secret special operations unit, Rimon, mainly fighting terror in Gaza, and utilized him as a counterterrorism adviser in the PM's office in the late 1990s. But, since Dagan's career was punctuated by several spells as a reservist, he did not have the gilded reputation of many mainstream IDF generals.

He believed in striking at Israel's enemies with surgical precision. We quickly became used to his lectures on a fundamental point of principle: "It's the job of the Israeli defense establishment to do whatever it can to put off the next war for as long as possible, using covert means to strike at the enemy in a focused manner."

This chimed with me, since I had recommitted myself to the Mossad after taking a year's sabbatical in 2000, when my life had reached a crossroads. I was based in Europe and was concentrating on Yehonatan's education when the school in Budapest, at which he had enlisted, closed. It was a complicated situation, and his care came first.

Once his studies had been organized, and his welfare guaranteed, I focused on my future. I went through a process of self-evaluation. I had been recruited by the Mossad at the age of twenty-two and started a year later. Now, at age forty, I faced an all-too common midlife dilemma. I had to ask myself, *Are you in the right place?*

I had attractive options. The opportunity to develop my knowledge base at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard was appealing. I had an important offer to go into the hi-tech industry in Israel, which was flourishing, during the tech hype of the new millennium.

The Mossad had gone through a troubled spell, with several high-profile operational failures. Danny Yatom, another former comrade of Meir Dagan, resigned, prematurely in the eyes of some, after two years as director. I had good managers, but felt as if the organization was frozen. It was not active enough for my liking.

Its work still spoke to me though. I realized this was what I liked doing, what I was instinctively suited to. I had no need to rush. As things have turned out, my experience of governmental relations is practical, rather than academic. Following my retirement from the Mossad, I enjoy the intellectual freedom of working in the hi-tech world.

All things considered, it was probably a smart call to ensure that I returned to duty the minute after midnight on the day my sabbatical expired. I was essentially in middle management under Efraim Halevy, who returned to the organization on succeeding Yatom in 1998. A natural pragmatist, he had made his reputation as deputy director, in helping to secure the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Dagan didn't like us so much in the beginning, but for good reason if you accept, as I do, the concept of organizational development. An institution like the Mossad does not need to be reinvented, but it can be refined, according to the nature of an individual's leadership.

I was the twelfth director of thirteen. Six of us survive, following the sad death of Shabtai Shavit on holiday in Sicily in September 2023. Each one of us is different, although the gravity of the job means it must be taken super seriously. Your time is not your own. We are bonded by the inescapable truth that if the Mossad is not doing what needs to be done, no one else will do it.

We are not necessarily all friends, but it is a distinctive brotherhood, since the state of Israel has only one Mossad. We have regular lunches. We don't look the same, we don't think the same, and, in that sense, we are very Israeli. The group represents a deep pool of practical knowledge; strategies, personalities, and attitudes may differ, but we have all felt the burden of big decisions.

Each of us had our own trials and tribulations, our problems and priorities. We found different pathways in familiar territory. Such divergence of approach is natural since the organization has changed its scope several times since its formation in December 1949.

In the beginning we were chasing Nazis; the kidnapping in Argentina, abduction to Israel and the subsequent trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Holocaust, was an era-defining operation. So too was Operation Wrath of God, the campaign of vengeance against those responsible for the Munich massacre of eleven Israeli Olympic athletes and coaches in 1972.

Each carried the hallmark of Kidon, the "Spear" in free translation from the Hebrew. This special unit, select and secretive, captures the mystique of the Mossad, but in structural terms it represents just another discipline. That

consistency of structure, involving four main divisions, is key to our efficiency.

One of my two main areas of influence, human intelligence or HUMINT to give it its modern, abbreviated form, has been enshrined in the organization from the outset. The other, special operations, is Kidon-like, and based on HUMINT sources. We have upgraded our capabilities based on those resources.

If you examine an organogram, there seems a theoretical danger that the Mossad could become silo-driven, but in reality, the structure is sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing times and contrasting approaches. When the iron curtain fell, for instance, there was a shift away from the concentration on supporting Israelis in particular, and Jews in general, in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Similarly, Efraim Halevy wanted to re-establish a disciplined and extremely well-ordered Mossad, following operational setbacks. It wasn't exactly a case of fire and ice, but Dagan, his successor, felt unrestrained by history. The beauty of his approach, coming from a relatively informal military background, is that he knew precisely what he wanted to do; he was equally aware he didn't know how to do it.

Trust me, he was not afraid to demand answers.

When I became Mossad director, I had a broad view, since I had partnered with all of the organization's units operationally, and with the army special units too. Dagan, raw and passionately engaged, exuded an aura of authority but had little experience of intelligence activity.

He had not been in the field. He didn't have the sense of what it is like to carry a forged foreign passport and go through an unfriendly border control. He didn't know what your heartbeat feels or sounds like in that situation.

He had no experience of working undercover, creating and living a cover story that may have to be changed suddenly and radically. He had never had to be someone else, a completely different character within thirty minutes, to ensure his safety and the security of others. He never had to run away from the enemy after being discovered.

What he did have was certainty of purpose, a clarity of vision. He was evangelical about conducting, and winning, a covert war against Iran, and any other nation with dangerous nuclear ambitions. He was prepared to be

ruthless in dealing with Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist proxies. He had unequivocal political and financial support.

Others, like Shabtai Shavit, the last director whose name was classified information until the end of his term of office, had laid the groundwork. He was a beneficial influence from 1989 to 1996, through his strengthening and support of successful intelligence operations in the region. But without criticizing any of his predecessors, Dagan had a refreshing directness.

In his view, knowledge alone was not enough. In counterterrorism terms, it is relatively unimportant to know an enemy is trying to shoot us in the streets of Paris, Vienna, or anywhere else in the world. What is vital is using that information to destroy their operation. Disrupt it, kill it, ensure that it does not happen.

The same principle applies to a nuclear program or a missile threat. Attack at the source.

As the head of a brigade, I had many subordinates, but several superiors above me. Yet Dagan made a point of searching me out whenever he visited our division. He was a diligent if restless student, and was desperate to learn from those of us who had been at the sharper end of operations.

I engaged with him immediately. I related to his boldness, respected his high-level background and responded to his determination to drill down into the details. In turn, he knew everything about me. He knew my family, knew my history, knew what I had done abroad. He had evidently developed a densely packed profile of me.

The questions began on a personal level, about my kids, and Yehonatan's welfare. He wanted to know why I had taken the sabbatical, and how I had readapted to life in the organization. He asked what I thought about his plans and was prepared to satisfy my curiosity about how things would change.

His inclusivity was a sign of strength, rather than weakness. He took the initiative and embarked on a rare but exhaustive series of visits to collection officers in the field, across the world. His motivation was twofold.

Operatives knew they were being monitored, and would not be allowed to work with impunity, for their own ends. They were accountable. Dagan was not a distant figurehead; by being so visible, on a regular basis, he was taking out insurance against the isolation of leadership.

Having been granted the vision, due to the relevance of my role in special ops, he gave me the tools to do the job. I was working on a new

intelligence concept, an operating system named HUGINT. This combined the human intelligence capabilities of the Mossad with signal intelligence, the speciality of Unit 8200, the military intelligence arm of the IDF, and more super-secret capabilities.

Dagan proved to be a great partner in the project. He understood the delicacy of the internal political environment, and recognized the potential of a more cohesive approach, combining human and technical qualities to better penetrate the enemy's defenses. Characteristically, he led from the front.

Those days are remembered, almost fondly, by some Mossad veterans as the days of hysteria. Dagan would be one of the first to arrive in the office and was habitually one of the last to leave. His debriefs were long and loud. His skepticism was literally shouted to the heavens.

As I said, I found him compelling. He was very open about who he thought you were, and who he thought you could be. He was not the type to sit down with you and shower you with compliments. He didn't say, "Yossi, I love what you do. You are a great commander, such a fighter."

No. It was more, "I'll cut your balls off if you don't do enough." That's my guy. That's his style, always angry, never happy. I have a different approach. I can be angry, too, but balance that with subtly framed personal feedback. I suppose I am more of a psychologist.

By nature, Meir was a very suspicious guy. Everything we said, he wanted to check and check again. He needed to be convinced that we had done what we said we had done. He demanded the truth, however unpalatable. He had an instinct for anyone attempting to dissemble or deflect.

I knew I could be straight with him and, without being complacent, felt I was in a very tight circle of trust. This was not the same for all. He would scream at people, "You didn't do what I told you to do!" and shout even louder when they attempted to claim they had carried out his orders to the letter. His arguments tended to be one-sided and brutally expressed.

He was a very high-tempo individual. He had a kind of personal and professional need to be reassured that we understood him and would carry through on his commands. So why, on a personal level, was our relationship so productive? To repeat an earlier question, what did he see in me?

That's difficult to measure, because of the nature of the man. For all the harsher aspects of his personality, he had a very emotional, almost sensitive

side. He cried easily, and often. The contrast in his character was such he could unsparingly criticize you, and then weep, in the same session.

When he became Mossad director, I was effectively a fifth-tier employee. I had the head and deputy head of the Junction division, which deals with human intelligence, above me. The chain of command led to the deputy director and director of the organization.

Dagan was not the first to promote me, but under him I rose dramatically. He ignored convention and installed me as head of the Junction division when a vacancy arose in 2004. That saved me the usual five-year wait for the top job, working as the division's deputy.

Human nature being as it is, that type of decision creates a lot of internal jealousy, but I didn't care. I've never been one for striking poses best suited to the kindergarten. I viewed the division as my home; I'd spent twenty-two years there before becoming director. That's a big part of my life. I'd been around a long time, slow cooking.

In any case, even before that preferment, I was already working like crazy under Dagan's command. One of his first acts was to personally delegate me to oversee special operations across the organization. We had quickly reached the point where Iran was our shared obsession, one that he was determined to ingrain into the Mossad's collective psyche.

His passion was convincing to the point of being overpowering, but that was balanced by his ability to impart strong, simple statements of intent. He illustrated our task, and underlined his overriding ambition, by producing almost a mind map, in the shape of a target.

It included pertinent groups, like Jewish communities and security operatives in several disciplines, positioned in concentric circles, but the eye was drawn to the center of the target. That red bull's-eye represented the disruption of the Iranian nuclear program. My task—our task—was to ensure our aim was true.

I framed that target, and put it on my office wall, above my head, as a constant reminder of what I was investing my life in. I play from the heart. Without that emotional attachment, I simply cannot make the necessary sacrifices. I believed in the mission, and the virtues of our cause. It had to be carried out with maximum effect.

Dagan said, "Do it." The question was, "How?"

It involved the development of a new structure, a new discipline. We had to build our force from the bottom up. I had immediately to engage

with the technology division, which had the necessary expertise to complement our traditional human capabilities.

In later years, the then head of that technology division and I would be seen as rivals for the job of running the Mossad (fortunately I prevailed, thanks in part, so I am told, to a recommendation to PM Benjamin Netanyahu by Dagan), but in that critical moment he was a valued partner, an impressive professional.

I had to create a relationship not only with him and his team, but with those in the signal division and our National Security Agency, Unit 8200. In and beyond that triangle, I had to recruit the right people to bring the special-ops unit with me. I can't reveal the specifics of what we did, but our work was eventually broken down into four subdisciplines.

Some dealt with softer targets, but the cumulative effort concentrated on the creation of super intelligence, very precise and intrusive, that penetrated the heart of enemy structures. Our methodology had to be clear, clever, and capable of compromising the most sophisticated defense systems.

I wanted our people to have a deep understanding of our technologies, because everything we did was designed to be driven by three complementary elements: human intelligence, trusted sources, and the latest local and global technology. We had to have a sophisticated appreciation of the human condition, and be able to direct missions remotely, when required.

One of the first major successes involved the disruption of the main first-generation centrifuge research and development site in Natanz, in Iran. Though this has subsequently grown into a 100,000-square-meter bunker, 8 meters underground, protected by a concrete wall, 2.5 meters thick and with a reinforced concrete roof covered by another 22 meters of earth, we had to scan the surface to target the building that was being used to develop Iran's first operational cascade of interconnected centrifuges for uranium enrichment.

A combination of sophisticated technology and the courage of an in-house agent, who supplied vital intelligence, enabled us to strike surgically and successfully. It is not essential to blow things up, and inflict inevitable casualties.

Iran is obviously a difficult country in which to operate, and we have to recruit the right people in the right places. From a strategic point of view, I, as a leader, have to concentrate not only on today's mission, but also on

tomorrow's mission. That means taking care of the human being at the center of the web and preparing the state of Israel better, for our next war.

It's not necessarily my job to ensure the mission aligns with political reality. It's not that important, because what Israeli politician, or prime minister, would say that he had little interest in neutralizing Iran? That's simply not going to happen. There might be differences of emphasis, but everyone wants to be depicted as a fighter against our filthiest foe.

Context is all. It took eleven years for Israel to provide official confirmation that four F-16I fighters flew hundreds of miles into Syria on September 6, 2007, before destroying the partially completed Al-Kibar nuclear facility near Deir ez-Zor, on the banks of the River Euphrates.

Though the arena of conflict was different, the release of previously classified footage, images, and intelligence documents related to the "irreversible damage" caused by the attack added timely momentum to our political campaign to alert the world to Iran's lies.

It also provided belated justification for Dagan's commitment to combat the nuclear threat, wherever it was based. We had been gathering intelligence in earnest since 2004, after detecting suspicious patterns of behavior and movement of key personnel that signaled cooperation between the Syrians and North Koreans.

Dagan argued forcibly for an attack once our suspicions, that a nuclear reactor on the site would be used to produce plutonium, were justified. To quote an official report, dated March 30, 2007, the reactor was "liable to be activated in approximately another year."

It was dubbed Operation Outside the Box, a superficial indulgence that does scant justice to the diligence of surveillance operations, which extended into Europe, and the intelligence and intensity of Dagan's leadership. He added so much to my understanding of the need to use carefully collected information decisively and to devastating effect.

In retrospect, it is no coincidence that we worked well together. Like him, I had an aversion from my earliest days to those who spoke empty words, even if they were my teachers, rabbis, or commanders. If I believed they were not speaking truly, I would decry them, call them out.

I am not saying that I am always right, but I sustained that approach throughout my thirty-eight years in the Mossad. As head of the organization, a clear mind is essential. I would listen to some politicians and

army generals, droning on, and think to myself, *That's nonsense. He's not a serious individual*.

Again, like Dagan, I simply wanted to be judged on results, not on such fripperies as the suits, ties, and shoes I wore. I don't care about gossip or uninformed speculation. I value the truth, appreciate my responsibilities, and have learned life's boundaries.

You can't have 100 percent of what you want. I never did, incidentally. People may say I was lucky to be so dramatically promoted, but I fought like hell for that. It was never easy. There were so many good friends and colleagues, in the same line, fighting for the same jobs.

I'm so happy I was chosen.

Chapter 12

Science Fact

So, you're a Hollywood scriptwriter. How would you weave a story featuring a killer robot, a remote assassin, an illicit nuclear program, a murderous theocratic regime, a shadowy commander, and a target who is the nation's second most-guarded individual, after the Spiritual Leader?

Perhaps it would go something like this.

The commander stands facing a bank of computer screens at a secret location. Cameras depict everyday scenes on a dusty country road east of Tehran, in late November. A stray dog wanders into the shot; traffic is sparse. This is the calm before the storm.

The intended victim, the pioneer of the regime's nuclear development program, has been stalked for more than fifteen years. He has been under direct surveillance, on the ground, for the past eight months. The commander has had to marry a warrior's mentality with a diplomat's dexterity, since this is the type of mission that requires sanction at the highest level, from the most significant allies.

You need a little character development? Each man, hunter and hunted, is a deep thinker. Both have earned the trust of prime ministers and presidents. These adversaries have never met, for obvious reasons, but they know each other well, because each has attempted to burrow into the others' mind.

The scientist, a jowly, bespectacled figure with a gray beard flecked with remnants of black, has become used to being under threat. He covertly led the military nuclear development program, where he was instrumental in securing North Korean assistance. He is reputed to be an expert in biological warfare.

He is no innocent. He has subverted nanotechnology, which in simplistic terms is the understanding and control of materials on the molecular, atomic, or subatomic level, from its more beneficial applications, such as vaccine development, the treatment of cancer and cardiovascular disease, and advances in the production of clean energy.

He is unaware that his nemesis is also in that secret bunker, thousands of miles away, located next to his commander. A handpicked, highly skilled sniper, he has the job of remotely activating an automated 7.62mm machine gun, hidden in the bed of a pickup truck, parked in an elevated position on the side of the road that leads to the victim's intended destination.

Now I know, as a movie lover myself, that audiences are prepared to suspend disbelief only for so long. How, for instance, is it possible to smuggle a remotely controlled machine gun, equipped with AI-programmed computers that weighs around a ton once its accessories are factored in, into such hostile territory?

How do you get such a robot weapon onto the streets of Iran? By the post in a consignment that must be signed for? Hardly. Where does it come from? There are manufacturing bases in several nations. Who puts it there, so the target is literally in the line of fire?

That question, and the answer, reveals one of the simple truths of intelligence operations: however advanced or fantastical the technology, it is compromised without the human element. Never underestimate the power of a beating heart and a courageous spirit in a highly motivated individual.

This can be a positive, as in the discreet yet complete surveillance operation that learns, from the minutiae of the target's daily routine, what brand of aftershave he is using. It can occasionally be a negative, as emphasized by the security errors and the sense of complacency that contributed to the scientist's sudden death.

The weapon is smuggled, piece by piece, into Iran over a series of operations. Care is taken never to duplicate the routes, or the methods used, in case of interception. It is secretly reassembled and camouflaged. It is designed to be destroyed, immediately after use, by explosives packed around it in the truck, which is put in position at dawn on D-day.

The scientist usually travels in a motorcade of up to eight cars, but on this fateful Friday afternoon there are only five cars assigned to his bodyguards. He ignores advice not to drive himself and gets behind the

wheel of a black unarmoured Nissan Teana sedan, without bulletproof windows, which slots in after the lead vehicle.

Once the agents monitoring him signal to their distant headquarters that the car is on the move, the sniper calibrates the gun sights and focuses on the satellite images, which are generated in real time. Imagine the tension. Think of the self-control such a man requires, when there is a riptide of adrenaline in the room.

Pictures transmitted from a supposedly broken-down car, jacked up on the roadside, a little less than a mile from the intended kill zone, confirm the target's fatal mistake. The lead car in the convoy accelerates away to check that the destination point, a villa in the town of Absard, is secure.

The sniper cocks the weapon. He is close enough to hear his commander's breathing patterns. The scientist's car is now in front, utterly exposed. Sophisticated software confirms he is driving. His wife is next to him in the front seat.

The foreign agents and their local proxies have scattered. Their job is done. There would be no Wild West shootout, capable of endangering innocents unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The commander had calculated this was a cleaner, more productive form of attack than using a drone, which could be picked up by defense systems and neutralized.

The sniper is professionally detached, but even someone of his experience later acknowledges a strange sense of awe at the power technology gives him, to operate so viscerally in the moment. "Go," he orders, as the scientist's car slows down at a speed bump on a long, straight road bordered by skeletal, largely leafless trees.

The computerized image that the sniper sees, sent to the control room via satellite, is a fraction of a second old. Since the car is also in motion, there is a time lag of around 1.6 seconds before his actions have a consequence. He softly squeezes the trigger. In another country, another world, three bullets from the flatbed truck pierce the black Nissan's windshield at a reflex angle, in an upward trajectory.

The tremor of the gun's recoil and the target's speed across the ground are considered and countered by artificial intelligence. The sniper recalibrates his sights as the victim, hit in the initial burst of fire, stumbles out of the car and attempts to shield himself by crouching behind the driver's door.

“Use your entire magazine—finish the job,” orders the commander. The scientist falls backward, mortally wounded by a burst of automatic fire. His wife, unscathed despite being within touching distance of him in the car, cradles his head in her lap.

His bodyguards, led by a celebrated judo champion, are running around in a panic, unable to comprehend where the attack has come from and who has undertaken it. At that moment, the flatbed truck explodes. The wreckage comes to rest at the foot of an electricity pole, no more than twenty meters from the victim’s car.

The entire operation, in which fifteen bullets are fired, takes less than a minute. It has the capacity to set the Iranian nuclear program back years. The sense of alarm and confusion is understandable, since the authorities are in the dark; investigators discover, far too late, that security cameras in the area have been disabled.

The regime reacts predictably. It concocts a fantasy version of events, to save face. Conflicting political factions, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the much-feared Ministry of Intelligence, subsequently tear at each other’s throats in an attempt to deflect blame. This is a humiliating, deeply symbolic defeat.

No one, however exalted or protected, is safe. The scars of a sustained campaign of attacks on prominent nuclear scientists, and the disruption and destruction of important facilities, are reopened. The grievous blow of the loss of Major General Qassim Soleimani, the Iranian military commander killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020, is reinforced.

The commander pats the sniper on the back. Mission accomplished. Roll end credits.

Far-fetched? Science fiction? It might have blockbuster storylines, but this is science fact. Inevitably, perhaps, Israel has been identified, in the wider world, as being behind the killing of Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. As I have mentioned before, speculation or assumption may give enemies pause for thought, but the usual game of whodunit underplays a wider point.

Several nations have the capacity to strike in that manner. Artificial intelligence is part of a modern armory. Where are we going with all this? What does the future of such operations look like?

I see the benefits of remotely controlled responses. If we, in the Mossad, can do most of what we do unmanned, we will do so. It removes one of the key restraining factors since missions are routinely abbreviated or

abandoned when the rescue of our operatives is threatened. Their safety is paramount.

If I could, for example, place something that would do the job by itself in the danger zone, without requiring a man or woman in the circle, I would do so. The problem is that technology has yet to be applied uniformly. F-16 fighter jets, for instance, cannot be flown remotely; a pilot, brave and exhaustively trained, is still required. But these fighter jets, too, will soon be operated fully by AI.

The pace of development is accelerating, however. Huge, agile, and fast UMVs (unmanned vehicles or drones) will eventually replace the jet fighters. By extension, there will be unmanned tanks and robots programmed to behave like soldiers.

The world is moving only one way. There are no dinosaurs in our environment, even though some have the sharp teeth of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Anyone involved in espionage or intelligence gathering will be affected in one way or the other. The key factor is the setting of appropriate limits.

Technologies with a military application tend eventually to be controlled dramatically. Take nuclear power, which in its purest form can be beneficial to mankind. The world expects that, if you want a uranium enrichment facility, you must have approval from the IAEA in Vienna, and submit to regular inspections. This is why the persistent duplicitous behavior of the Iranians is so dangerous, and completely unacceptable.

The control of technology is not a new issue. As long ago as the summer of 2015, more than one thousand scientists, including Stephen Hawking, called for a ban on robotic weapons and the development of artificial intelligence for military use. Their open letter highlighted fears that technology could evolve without human intervention.

The International Committee of the Red Cross warned in 2020 that the phenomenon was “not from a distant dystopian future.” It insisted: “They [AI weapons] are an immediate cause of humanitarian concern and demand an urgent international response.” More hysterical observers talked about “creating a world where it’s no longer safe to be outside because you might be chased down by swarms of slaughterbots.”

I’m more realistic. In operational terms, the Mossad cannot afford to allow others to seize the initiative in this space. People are of primary

importance for their instincts and intellect, but technical expertise must be leading edge.

Some of this will be created in-house. Other elements will be outsourced, especially from a vibrant, cutting-edge high-tech industry. We are working intensively in a tough world that we have to negotiate as easily and as safely as possible. We have to survive existing surveillance systems and operate in a very precise manner. Our dependence on technology is total.

Today it is useless to operate without the right type of technology. Expressed simply, the lack of such support reduces the chances to reach your target.

I promoted key people, with suitable skills, across the organization. My advocacy was no empty gesture, since I allocated unprecedented resources to the area. Whether it was cyber-hacking capability or special-ops technology, I was determined to provide the best.

We were fighting for a new type of Mossad. Not alone, since there were hundreds and thousands of people contributing to generational change in the organization. Certainly, we led to the extreme.

One of the most important commanders at that point of change was the head of the technology department. I needed him and he needed me. We reached the point where I had wanted to be, for many years. It fulfilled my wishes because I wanted us to be bold and innovative.

I have practical experience in the application of artificial intelligence. It might change the world fundamentally, and I don't buy typically sanguine government statements that they have everything under control. AI is a revolution in our world in its entirety.

Ask yourself, dear reader, whether you feel any different today because of the availability of AI. Many of you won't, since you choose to ignore it. Some of you would use it, others would not. Whatever attitude you take, it will have some effect on your life. Change is inevitable, and surprisingly fast.

Since you are reading or listening to these words, let's be specific in one small but very relevant area. The creativity of authors can apparently be emulated with depressingly little fuss. We are not there yet, since AI-generated books rely heavily on data and statistical analysis, and lack the creativity and emotional impact of human writing, but some estimate that an AI novel will become a reality in the next decade.

Well, let's get there first and see what happens. In addition to new forms of literature, movies, which already use CGI (computer-generated imagery), will evolve faster and more dramatically.

Robotics will come in across a range of industries. Most of what we'll do, we'll do differently. It is a kind of a revolution, but it's not necessarily going to impact our lives negatively. It's a natural, yet unnatural progression, if that makes sense.

Change has always been mistrusted. People were worried about the introduction of electricity. Many, including US President Benjamin Harrison, who held office between 1889 and 1893, were afraid to use it. He reputedly had White House staff turn the lights on and off because he was scared of being electrocuted.

It was beyond the consciousness of the majority of the populace, but hardly a new phenomenon. Thales, a Greek, discovered static electricity around 400 BCE by rubbing amber with silk. Though Benjamin Franklin is popularly credited for its discovery in the eighteenth century (legend insists that he flew a kite with a metal key tied to it during a thunderstorm), many others led the way.

The printing press was feared by the ruling classes, who felt threatened by the prospect of easily available books to a newly literate common man. Some doctors in Victorian England believed the motion of newly developed passenger trains produced "railway madmen" whose brains were affected by jarring and jolting on primitive tracks.

Alarmist tendencies are not exclusive to the dim and distant past. Who else remembers the Y2K hysteria around the millennium, when bugs were supposed to disrupt banking, utilities, and government institutions on January 1, 2000? It was an absurd distraction.

Most innovations are quickly absorbed into everyday life. For good or ill, the internet is fundamental to modern living. We consume information, a little too easily and gullibly in my view, from our Smart TVs and our smart phones, which are a crutch. Communication will be improved by AI. Time will, hopefully, be used more productively.

We will have new ways to consume and define art. We will not learn in the same way. I am a great believer in the potency of language skills, but even I have to accept it is easier for the vast majority to simply go online if they need something translated. What we take for granted today will not be around in fifteen, twenty years' time.

Philosophically, I am at ease with the understanding that technology will constantly advance.

Weaponry cannot somehow be excluded from enhancement. Did you learn to throw a spear at your enemies? I hope not, but once you would have struggled to survive without such a skill. How many of us are trained to ride horses these days?

People in Victorian England, for instance, would simply not have believed that, in less than a century, there would be no horse-drawn carriages on the streets. On that point, it seems strange to think that horses and mules were part of the war effort in both world wars, but they are now restricted to pageantry duties, or the parade ground.

Each generation can't fully imagine what is to come. I am sure we will not be using carbon gas, or any of the fossil fuels, in fifty years' time. We'll use the sun, renewable energies. With that positive comes a negative. Coal miners, and those in other fossil-based industries, will have to find new jobs.

Quantum computing is on our horizon. This will make traditional computers, which utilize a stream of electrical impulses in binary form to encode information, effectively redundant due to relatively restricted processing ability.

Everyone will be affected by this revolution, driven by the principles of quantum theory, which, in mercifully simple terms, is the theoretical basis of modern physics that explains the nature and behavior of matter and energy on an atomic and subatomic level.

This rapidly developing technology, unthinkable to scientists less than thirty years ago, will dramatically improve the problem-solving capacity of computers. It will force us to examine the limits of encryption, since it will crack existing codes with devastating speed and effectiveness. It will be impossible to create a code that cannot be broken or breached.

Cyber hacking is an established element of national self-defense. The development of the so-called Stuxnet virus, attributed globally but without overt confirmation to our international allies, wreaked havoc on the Iranian nuclear system.

In layman's terms, it was a computer worm that targeted data systems, especially at the Natanz enrichment complex. In technical terms, the virus caused the centrifuge rotors to spin uncontrollably fast. This resulted in a catastrophic failure of the rotor wall, and the destruction of the centrifuge.

It was a hugely successful operation, since the damage it created was sustained, rather than a one-off event, and increased in intensity over time. By 2010, it had resulted in the decommission and replacement of around one thousand centrifuges. The geek, rather than the meek, had inherited the Earth.

It is impossible for me to enlarge on the technological tools at the disposal of the Mossad, since it would undermine the exercise and compromise a fundamental personal commitment, but they are smart and used cohesively. The concept has been shrewdly refined up to the present day and is uniquely positioned to continue to respond to requirements and events.

For all the lurid stories of lethal robots and killing squads, a combination of very human habits and increasingly familiar technological capabilities can still be our greatest asset. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you are an individual of special interest to me as an intelligence operative. I have ways and means to enter your life.

I want to know everything you say. I want to know everywhere you go. I want to know anyone you meet, see, or engage with. I want to know the things you tell your husband or wife or business partner. I want to understand you.

How do I do so? My first weapon is likely to be your social media, your smart phone, or watch. As I mentioned earlier, in today's world they are constant companions, a crutch. But are they a friend? Are they secure? You might be prudent, but you might be surprised at your vulnerability.

Your life is on your phone. It is a deeply personal possession. It records your heart rate, your bank details, your emails, texts, and WhatsApp conversations. It summarizes your sleep patterns, your fitness levels. Once I enter the device, it tells me who you communicate with and, through the GPS function, where you are.

Your smart watch is another window into your world.

You can take that watch anywhere you want without leaving my side. Yours is mine. The movement of the watch on your wrist will provide the power for the microinstrumentation, so that you never suspect your pride and joy has been interfered with. All that remains is for us to harvest the information you will unwittingly supply.

Chapter 13

Three-Dimensional Chess

Contrary to the mixture of ignorance, opportunism, misinformation, and performative prejudice that tends to pass as public opinion in these distorted, overheated times, it is not the overriding aim of the Mossad to kill people. We do not operate solely to take lives away.

Of course, we do eliminate our enemies when necessary. Like any such organization, we reserve the right to strike back with maximum force against those who are trying to kill our operatives and, by extension because they pose a real and present danger to the security of our nation, our citizens.

It is our duty to protect those who could be killed by a nuclear bomb, an explosive device on our streets, or in a drive-by shooting on our roads. We are pledged to respond, again and again, to those with a vicious vision and extreme views, who advocate the extermination of Jewish people, wherever they may be on this planet.

But we also conform to the principle that the Mossad is not only working for the state of Israel. We do what we can to help other nations guard themselves, by supplying critical information and associated capabilities that underpin their counterterrorism measures.

This is important, because if you want to have a healthy relationship with your counterparts, you have to have a substantial value to them too. It's not a one-way process, in which I want you to give me, show me, or tell me something for nothing. I am committed to contributing to your self-defensive efforts.

There is a reciprocal arrangement between many intelligence agencies, broadly based on common threats and interests. In return for the raw intelligence that helps to foil terrorist plots outside our borders, others

helped me when I needed their capabilities and cooperation, and they needed ours.

Working between bodies like this is a delicate matter and must be managed maturely. You have to create credibility with your assets, but there is a bigger picture, almost a higher purpose, that must be taken into account. We are opposing evil.

Never forget the human factor. Counterterrorism is a critical part of what we do because we are saving lives by doing so. Not just Israeli lives. Anyone's life. It goes without saying that is a very positive aspect of our work.

From a personal point of view, it was a touchstone of my time as director of the Mossad. It went all the way back to the line of personal responsibility. I had a choice not to share intel, to turn a blind eye to reports of suspicious movements, or details of active plots, but, on a point of principle, I had to help.

Life's harshest lessons, and most painful memories, are often of enduring value. I have never forgotten the events of March 22, 2016, some two and a half months after I had taken charge. The deaths of thirty-two people, in two co-ordinated terrorist incidents in Brussels, stay with me.

Two suicide bombers, ferrying explosives in large suitcases on trollies, attacked the departure hall at Zaventem Airport. The first explosion occurred at 7:58 a.m. in check-in row 11; nine seconds later another homemade nail bomb was detonated in check-in row 2. An accomplice fled the airport without setting off his device, which was later destroyed by a controlled explosion.

A little more than an hour later, at 9:11 a.m., another suicide bomber detonated a nail bomb in a rucksack in the central carriage of a three-carriage train pulling out of Maelbeek metro station, located ten kilometers from the airport, near the European Commission headquarters in the European Quarter of Brussels. Once again, an accomplice fled without detonating an identical bomb.

More than three hundred people were injured in the two outrages; a court later ruled that three survivors subsequently died as a direct result of being caught up in the carnage. One, a man, committed suicide, another, a woman, chose euthanasia while the balance of her mind was disturbed. Another man died of cancer because he was too badly hurt to continue treatment.

So many lives cut short. So many lives ruined.

Islamic State, which is also known by the acronyms ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh, claimed responsibility for what was obviously a major attack. I was monitoring events from my desk in Tel Aviv when, at around twelve o'clock that day, my blood ran cold.

I received an intelligence alert that predicted precisely what had occurred at the station in Maelbeek. A Daesh terrorist cell, spooked by police surveillance and linked to the Paris attacks that killed 130 people the previous November, was preparing to strike at transport hubs in the Belgian capital. The warning reached me too late.

I felt strongly that I had a moral duty to immediately call my Belgian counterpart to share details. I told him I was with him, then and in the future. He was under obvious pressure. Local politicians and the public were outraged by security lapses and seeking to apportion blame.

The prevailing mood of skepticism was summed up by the Israeli minister who remarked: "What else do you expect from the Belgians? They're only good for making chocolate." Such cynicism, uncalled for and untimely, didn't sit well with me.

Belgium's State Security Service, the VSSE (also known in Dutch as Staatsveiligheid and in French as Sûreté de l'État), was formed in 1830 and is the world's oldest intelligence service, with the exception of that operated by the Vatican. Jaak Raes, its head for ten years until he stepped down in April 2024, had also been working with the GSSI, the military intelligence arm, to improve systemic shortcomings.

Just as the Brussels bombings were an event of seismic proportions, they were, in hindsight, a significant test of my nascent leadership of the Mossad. I promised myself I would do everything in my power to never again be in the position of not having critical information at hand at the right time.

That afternoon, as the scale of casualties became clear, I called my senior officials to a meeting, where I took the strategic decision that, from that moment on, the Mossad would spare no effort in understanding and disrupting Daesh activity.

That required structural changes in the organization, and the strengthening of our cooperation with Unit 8200, the military intelligence arm. We had a collective responsibility to fulfil. We had to penetrate the lives of those linked to Daesh. We had to isolate the individuals, learn

where and when they were operating, making sure that our efforts were directed toward the right places within ISIS.

To be specific, I needed insight into the Intelligence Department within ISIS, situated deep in the Levant. We were subsequently able to share important information with our allies.

Without identifying the actual terrorist, you cannot disrupt the cell, because there is no focal point for your search. Someone has to make the homemade explosives, set the car bombs, plant the booby traps or shoot the pistols. Trace the person, link him or her to the scene of the intended crime, and you have a chance.

Daesh had directed terror attacks all over the world and, by common consent, we had a better grasp of their activities than most. This is the beauty of cohesive counterterrorism; if we detect that someone is planning terrorist activity, the "host" nation takes operational responsibility, rather than us. We say, "This is what we see, go catch them," or we join forces, and undertake the pursuit together.

In some cases, we conduct joint operations. In other countries, where there is no direct relationship with the appropriate counterpart, we do not reveal the intelligence. If I did pick up the phone, told them there was a terrorist in their network, and offered practical assistance, they wouldn't listen.

Trust has to be total and instinctive, because at the end of the day you are using very sensitive intelligence, gathered through the highest levels of professionalism, often under extreme pressure. You have to have conviction and confidence that the information will not be used prematurely by their government for political purposes.

I have come to accept it is not even close to being a reciprocal process, not because of any lack of will on behalf of allies or potential partners, but because they struggle to help themselves. Their individual jurisdiction doesn't really matter. I have asked them all, "Do you need us, the Israelis, to tell you what's going on in your nations?" And the unanimous answer was, "Yes, we do."

That help is readily given. During my time as Mossad director, we foiled dozens of terrorist plots across the world, from Europe to Australia, where, in July 2017, two brothers, Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat, intended to blow up an Etihad Airways plane carrying four hundred passengers from Sydney to Abu Dhabi. The explosives used to make the bomb had been sent

by air from Türkiye as part of a plot "inspired and directed" by Islamic State operatives in Syria.

Australian ministers praised assistance from the Israeli intelligence community and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Jewish-American leaders in a speech the following February that "unimaginable slaughter" had been prevented.

To underline the point that in its purest form, counterterrorism is the world of cooperation, internally and externally, the decisive tipoff that led to the arrest of the brothers, who had a secondary plan to build a chemical weapon, was provided by Unit 8200.

Traditional intelligence-gathering techniques revealed the partially constructed bomb was airmailed to Australia from Türkiye in a package containing a welding machine with an explosive device hidden inside a copper coil. Australian police confirmed that intercepted communications from the Syrian jihadist behind the attack, provided by "a foreign intelligence agency," proved critical.

The global intelligence community took stock. It was not unusual for Islamic State to provide remote instructions, but this was the first time direct logistical support, in the form of components originally assembled in Syria, had been given. Lessons were learned.

Occasionally, such as the disruption of a plot to bomb the headquarters of the French domestic intelligence agency, the DGSI, and three other targets, including Disneyland Paris, in 2015, threats are a little too close to home for comfort.

No agency can act as a global policeman in isolation, but it was noticeable, some would say surprising, that the sixty-six nations invited to form a coalition to "degrade and destroy" Daesh by US President Obama, in an address from the state floor of the White House in September 2014, did not include Israel.

The coalition's acknowledged focus, of liberating Daesh-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, is one thing. Fighting the terrorists outside the Levant, which includes present-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian territories, and much of Türkiye, is entirely another. It is much more difficult.

From a strategic perspective, if Daesh terrorists are operating in Syria, it is not my immediate problem. Countering that is down to the Americans and the coalition. I'm not there. But, to give a realistic example, if they

move from Iraq, crossing the Middle East and entering Europe through Türkiye and reaching France through Bulgaria, it is very much my problem.

Why? That's because I am entering into the unknown. I don't know if their targets will be Jewish, Israeli, American, or French, and I cannot afford to wait to find out. That's where, along with the military intelligence division, we can contribute dramatically to the counterterrorism effort.

There's a multilayered game, our version of three-dimensional chess, going on. There's what the world knows and what the politicians say. Underneath it all is what we do in an occasionally unlikely spirit of shared purpose. Our relationship with the Turks, for example, is driven by the overriding desire to curb Daesh's impact in the region.

Diplomatic relations were only restored in 2016, after a six-year hiatus, but, at a macro level, it was a frosty peace. Our nations continued to clash, most notably over Palestine, and the decision of US President Trump's administration to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

In that year, my first as head of the Mossad, there were sixteen separate terrorist attacks in Türkiye that killed a total of 318 people. The worst outrage was in August, when a suicide bomber, thought to be as young as twelve but ultimately unidentified, killed 57, including 34 children, at a Kurdish wedding in the southeastern city of Gaziantep.

Despite differences at the highest level, I recognized how the Turks were isolated in their pursuit of terrorists in their territory, and so I resolved to help them. It was not easy.

That trust of which I spoke earlier as the foundation stone of counterterrorism was certainly diluted. They were not fair with us, so we never reached the point where we could trade information freely. And yet what was I to do? Deny them terror alerts because they stirred the pot by criticizing us elsewhere? I refused. That's a different battle, a different ball game.

By the summer of 2018 it was governmental business as usual. Türkiye's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, suggested that "Hitler's spirit" was resurgent among Israeli officials. Bibi Netanyahu replied that Türkiye was becoming a "dark dictatorship." Intriguingly, Erdoğan appointed my old MIT counterpart, Hakan Fidan, as Türkiye's minister of foreign affairs in June 2023.

At the risk of repeating a recurring theme, in our business, personal relationships are extremely influential. I think ordinary citizens would be

surprised by the level of cooperation. They have no conception of how many threats there are, on a daily basis, on the streets of European cities.

Inevitably, with greater influence comes greater visibility, within intelligence circles at least. As an operative, you work in isolation. Spies don't know one another. I was never revealed to another secret service. If they discovered me, it would have been a significant failure.

You don't need me to tell you it is not a normal job, where there is natural interaction between people working in the same field. Say you're in insurance. Someone from another company is not hiding from you, and you're not hiding from anyone else. But we prefer the shadows.

I didn't care who the CIA or the French, for instance, were running in my region. Sometimes we knew about them, but it was not my business.

There is no one intelligence "type," but it is no coincidence that two of the most rewarding relationships, on a human level, have been with the Germans, in the Bundesnachrichtendienst, their federal intelligence service, and the British, in MI5 and MI6.

Germany suffered badly during that annus horribilis of 2016, which ended with a truck, carrying twenty-five tons of steel being driven into crowds at a Christmas market in Berlin's Breitscheidplatz, killing twelve shoppers and badly injuring seventy more.

The response was led by Bruno Kahl, who had taken charge of the Bundesnachrichtendienst in July of that year and proved to be a staunch ally. Over the next three years, nine jihadist plots were foiled, but inherent problems remain.

Almost all known terrorist networks in Germany, and aligned individuals, are linked to the ultraconservative Sunni Islamic ideology of Salafism. Shiite groups in the country also support the aims and activities of Hezbollah. The radicalization of migrants adds to the threat.

Bruno Kahl understands the extent of the challenge, operating in an often dirty, duplicitous environment. It is an onerous responsibility and, not to put too fine a point on it, hardly great fun. It is a trade that breeds hard, self-contained characters, but he has room for a softer side.

He caught me a little off guard one day, when he told me: "Yossi, the German people do not know how much they owe you guys. You were the number one agency in both quantity and quality in saving German lives. That's an important thing."

That was a beautiful compliment to hear, and revealed the strength of the bonds that can be formed when cooperation is at optimal levels. It made me pretty emotional. I don't mind admitting I had a tear in my eye.

In the UK, I developed similarly satisfying relationships with Sir Alex Younger at MI6, and Sir Andrew Parker at MI5. Each had a highly informed international outlook, and an intrinsic belief in the conventions of counterterrorism, which was amplified by the British government.

It praised "key allies" and pledged to "deepen our international counter-terrorism partnerships." This involved "aligning our strategic approaches and detecting and disrupting threats together, so that we can maximize the effectiveness of existing capabilities and develop new ones to protect our citizens."

Organizations operate differently, but MI6 is perhaps the closest to the Mossad, in terms of operational strategy. They are like us, globally focussed, with a dominant human element. They, too, have faith in the importance of intrusion, sending people to operate on the ground.

They are willing to take risks and, I believe, have operatives in tough territories. I am not sure of the others. Some have a minor role across the world. Others don't employ agents outside their national boundaries. They have no international activity, nothing.

MI5 is a very strong internal security service, like Israel's Shabak, to use the Hebrew name. In the summer of 2023, MI5 confirmed that thirty-nine terrorist plots had been foiled in the UK over the previous six years. In my opinion, that might even be an underestimate. Much of the operational detail is highly sensitive, but it is safe to say our expertise in Daesh strategies and movement patterns of terrorist cells was put to good use by the Brits.

Don't take my word for it. In another deeply affecting gesture, just before his retirement in 2020, Sir Andrew told me: "We do not give out Oscars in intelligence, but if we did, you would deserve one because you have disrupted so many terrorist operations in the UK. You did so for the British people, and not for the sake of the state of Israel. That will not be forgotten."

As far as the Mossad is concerned, the obligation to work for the common good is perpetual, sustained until this very day.

Perhaps you can understand, then, why my frustration is deeply felt when short-term political gain complicates or undermines jointly conducted

counterterrorism efforts. A case in point concerns Asadollah Asadi, a diplomat at the Iranian embassy in Vienna.

He was arrested on June 10, 2018, on a highway in Bavaria, while driving to his home in Austria, and subsequently charged with being involved in a plot to bomb a rally of the MEK, a political opposition group known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, in Villepinte, in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, close to Charles de Gaulle Airport.

The bomb he had handed over to two accomplices, a married couple of Iranian descent, Nasim Naami and Amir Saadoni, from a diplomatic suitcase just before his arrest would have caused mass casualties in an anticipated crowd of twenty-five thousand people.

The Iranian regime cited the 1961 Vienna Convention in protesting that his detention was unlawful, yet while Asadi was entitled to diplomatic immunity in Austria, the country of his posting, he did not have immunity on German soil, where he was initially taken into custody.

He was tried in Belgium, where Naami and Saadoni had been apprehended with half a kilogram of explosives and a detonator in a car that was blown up in a controlled explosion by the authorities. On February 4, 2021, Asadi was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for "attempted murder and involvement in terrorism." It was the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic that one of its diplomats had been imprisoned on terrorism charges.

It was a gratifying end, so we thought, to a textbook operation that began when we learned that the regime's chief of station in Vienna, living under diplomatic cover, was carrying out direct orders from Tehran, issued through the Ministry of Intelligence, to organize and oversee a bombing campaign against Iranian opposition groups in Europe.

Asadi, nominally the third secretary in the Iranian embassy, was the central figure, driving himself around Europe, recruiting people, mainly immigrants with an Iranian background, as terrorist assets.

It was a kind of chase, an exhaustive, not to say exhausting exercise; the Belgian court heard Asadi made 289 trips from his diplomatic base. We shared our information with the Germans and Belgians since their nationals were involved.

The cooperation was exceptional.

To quote a prosecution lawyer, after Asadi's trial, "The ruling shows two things: a diplomat doesn't have immunity for criminal acts . . . and the

responsibility of the Iranian state in what could have been carnage."

On May 26, 2023, it was announced that Asadollah Asadi had been freed following a prisoner swap for Olivier Vandecasteele, a Belgian aid worker who had been sentenced to forty years' imprisonment on trumped-up charges of spying, money laundering, and currency smuggling.

They were exchanged in Muscat, capital of Oman, under a treaty between Belgium and Iran that was struck in 2022 and upheld by Belgium's constitutional court the following spring. The Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, with headlines beckoning, hailed Vandecasteele's release and proclaimed: "Free at last."

On the one hand, it is impossible to ignore the joy and relief of the friends and family of a man who was doing a valuable humanitarian job in difficult circumstances before his detention and conviction. Exposed by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he was a convenient political pawn.

On the other hand, it is difficult to avoid suspicions of the Iranian regime's eagerness to secure the release of someone of self-evident importance to them. Taken from their point of view, the episode also underlined the effectiveness of their hostage economy.

Many foreign nationals, mostly of European or North American origin, are held and convicted on spurious charges. They languish in notorious jails, like Evin Prison in Tehran, for years until they can be cashed in as human chips.

These are the contradictions of our world.

Chapter 14

Speaking Truth to Power

World leaders have a vested interest in cultivating the myths and legends that surround them. Most profess to have a variety of lofty aims, which may be articles of faith, or convenient fictions. Some are elected. Others are perhaps less wedded to democratic principles.

I have seen every type, across the world, from Africa to Latin America, the USA to Russia, Europe to the Middle East. I have met many privately, where candor can flourish away from the conventions of diplomatic contact. I make no judgments about their political complexion, or personal standards.

Such matters are secondary to my role, in seeking support and understanding or in attempting to mediate or negotiate. I have no interest in domestic policies, unless they intrude in my sphere of potential influence. There's a beautiful simplicity, a professional structure, to the process. Boundaries are clear, and priorities must be precise.

Above all, when I enter a president's or prime minister's inner sanctum, I am consciously very modest and humble. I am aware of the responsibility, and the extent of the opportunity to influence, but this is not about me. My job is to promote my nation's policies and pursue a mutually beneficial solution.

To do so, I have to know the leader in front of me. What is he or she like? What are his or her driving forces? How do I penetrate his/her heart or his/her brain? How can I become his/her foil? The answers to such questions tend not to be available through Google, or on Wikipedia.

Intelligence gathering on an enemy, rather than a potential ally, has a completely different dynamic. As director of the Mossad, I wouldn't recruit

a leader, per se, but I would want to know the nature of their instructions to those below them.

At the highest level, when sensitivities are acute and subjects are weighty, it is all about trust. If I tell a leader something, he has to know the information is authentic. If I ask her to do something, she must be reassured that the request is an honest one, delivered with due humility.

If we are what we repeatedly do, to use a phrase originally attributed to Aristotle, that trust builds over time. When it becomes unquestioning, the relationship blooms. Discussions are conducted in a spirit of openness.

Preconceptions can be persistent. A very powerful leader said to me initially: "When you walk into a room I think, *how am I going to cope with the thirty-five years of Mossad experience that you have?* I'm not sure what I'm going to do with you."

Yet, little by little, meeting by meeting, fulfilled promise by fulfilled promise, we got to know one another. He stopped worrying. I knew I could trust him. His faith in me, his personal commitment to the discussions, convinced me that he could not be manipulated by those with malign intentions toward me, or the state of Israel.

Equally, an American president, when entering the Oval Office, welcomed me with these words: "I wonder how the strongest man in the Middle East is doing today."

Some relationships are corroded by distrust to the point at which hostility becomes overt. In one such meeting, a head of state began shouting at a counterpart, condemning him to his face, as a habitual liar whose word was worthless.

This had ramifications beyond a broken individual connection; it inevitably filtered into wider national associations. When a leader falls out with another leader it poisons everything. Their world contracts.

What I have tried to do is to engineer a kind of a virtual distance between me and my own leader, so I am judged in my own right. This shouldn't be taken to imply disrespect, disagreement, or disloyalty; it is a means to an end because my overriding duty is to get the job done, and to strengthen important relationships.

Outlooks can dictate outcomes. Occasionally, there is no alternative to simplifying matters by removing a difficult personal interaction or political history and a consequentially damaging set of emotions from the equation.

Sometimes, in such circumstances, I am given what I have been asking or arguing for as a personal gesture. I am told to warn my leader off from calling his counterpart, to thank them for their support. They stress to me, "I am doing this for you," or "Just because you asked me to."

When the general public observes a leader from a distance, they really know nothing about them. Their view is generally fashioned by the media which, in turn, is prey to the darker arts of image cultivation, selective media briefing and political influence.

I cannot afford any ambiguity. I have to learn about an individual on my own terms. Leadership is a very long story; to fully understand that story, I have to negotiate a maze with many twists, turns, and dead ends.

Each leader I meet for the first time is a clean sheet of paper. I may instinctively disagree with the nature of his regime, but I will never express it. I will tell him that I and my people and his own nation need him. I require something from him, an end result from our cooperation.

I care about my mission, above all else. When I go into a room, I know what I want to achieve. I am the protector, the defender, of my state's policy. That's an important distinction that must never be forgotten. This is not my business. It is not a private, personal crusade. I am representing my country and have a clear strategic line to follow.

Leaders are accustomed to supplicants and subjected to the swirling suspicions and constant maneuvering of their entourages. This is perhaps why historic figures of the significance of Abraham Lincoln and Otto von Bismarck were fascinated by the plays of William Shakespeare.

They were written with almost an insider's view of courtly intrigue, and the way power can be used, for good or bad. They capture the tension at the heart of the state, and the influence of overwhelming individual ambition. They are timeless and thought provoking.

I owe Bibi Netanyahu a lot for appointing me as his national security adviser, and head of the National Security Council, in November 2013. We had never worked directly before, although Meir Dagan encouraged me to meet privately with him when I was head of the Mossad's HUMINT division. This was virtually unheard of for employees of my rank, but I visited his home, to share professional insights, many times.

The PM sets the parameters of the NSA's role, dictating what you can and can't do. Only then, like in any other job, can you define its size and

scope. In my case, I got the green light to pursue most of the things I wanted, and relished being out of my comfort zone.

I dealt with so many policy issues that did not involve security per se. This was not only about familiar fields, like the standing of terror organizations, missile programs, and nuclear initiatives. It related to national topics, protocols, and internal relationships, but never in politics.

It is your job to be the prime minister's extra pair of eyes, his extended arm. This calls for a grasp of arcane ritual, cultural norms, nuance, local sensitivities, global optics, and the machinations of the modern media.

Detail, detail, detail. As NSA, you are responsible for the agenda for every meeting of ministers the PM oversees, whatever the subject matter. I had to brief cabinet ministers daily, about security, and my activities. I had to ensure they were up to speed on developments concerning Iran, Iraq, and the Palestinians. I had to expand on threats, provide status reports on our military capacity.

Operational information had to be delicately distributed, since some ministers, outside the secret circle, did not have clearance to receive it. That requires a nuanced approach, and natural diplomatic skills. It is a febrile environment, and some are primed to take offense.

Most leaders are excessively cautious; some are particularly prone to paranoia. They obsess about political tactics and personal agendas. Even those with level heads and good hearts feel a degree of suspicion and skepticism toward those close to them.

There is no set stereotype. The majority of leaders are emotionally stable, well educated, and naturally intelligent. Some perhaps lack intellectual capacity but compensate with animal cunning and utter ruthlessness.

In extreme cases, they lose the distinction between themselves, as inevitably fallible human beings, and the nations they rule. The most widely quoted example of this phenomenon is probably Louis XIV, the so-called Sun King of France, who is popularly assumed to have pronounced, "L'état, c'est moi." Literally translated, that means, "the state, it's me."

All leaders need the reassurance of knowing, deep down, you will not cheat them. Some are very confident of their assessment of character; others are less so and tend to make partially educated second guesses about individual intentions.

Nations are complex. Each has its own undercurrents and precedents. Each of us, as citizens, has little choice about the system that shapes our lives. It is generally an accident of birth whether we live and die in a democracy or a dictatorship.

There are so many cultural, educational, financial, geographical, and political differences to consider. There is also a military dimension to consider. Politicians and presidents with military backgrounds are common in the Middle East.

If we take Egypt as an example, Hosni Mubarak was a career officer in the Egyptian Air Force who rose to become its commander. He was appointed vice president by President Anwar Sadat, succeeding him after his assassination in 1981.

Sadat, who made a particular study of the Battle of Gettysburg before graduating from the Royal Military Academy in Cairo, benefitted from the patronage of his former colleague in the Signal Corps, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who led the Egyptian Revolution in 1952 and served as his nation's second president until 1970.

Israel has similar political bloodlines. Many ministers have served in the army. Yitzhak Rabin who, like Sadat, was assassinated because of his commitment to the peace process, was army chief of staff and oversaw Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967. Ariel Sharon, another pivotal prime minister, is revered in my country as a war hero and statesman.

The majority of politicians—and each and every one of their speechwriters—are scene stealers, so it was no coincidence that there were strong echoes of President Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" speech, made at Pearl Harbor, in Bibi's address to the US Congress in July 2024, on his first overseas visit since the declaration of war. His promise of "an absolute victory" had a familiar resonance.

Many would consider it fanciful that he considers himself Churchillian, a natural war leader, despite the upsurge in his popularity following the degradation of Hamas and Hezbollah in 2024. As I have already mentioned, he lacks the inspirational personality that registers with the man and woman on the street; Churchill's fate, in losing the UK's postwar election, suggests gratitude is in historically short supply.

War scours a leader's soul. It reveals fatal flaws in character and the folly of strategies based on careless thought and excessive emotion rather than rationality and a respect for history. That's why, despite his Jewish

heritage and the world's natural inclination to support an underdog, I criticize Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president.

I appreciate that this will be an unpopular view and I am certainly not condoning the Russian invasion of 2022, but Vladimir Putin is a far stronger, infinitely smarter adversary. That said, a more incisive, intelligent form of leadership on Zelenskyy's part could have avoided the conflagration. It might have involved unpalatable choices, but it would have saved a war and the devastation of countless communities.

Ukrainian leadership should have learned from Urho Kekkonen, who dominated Finnish politics for thirty-one years, first as prime minister and then as president. He steered his nation through the cold war by adding depth, breadth, and subtlety to the so-called active neutrality policy initiated by his predecessor, Juho Kusti Paasikivi.

He had the same problems of geography as Ukraine, an identical Russian threat on his borders, and similar warnings from history, but managed to steer an independent path while maintaining good relations and mutually beneficial trade arrangements with both the West and the Warsaw Pact nations.

It was a masterly act of self-protection that resulted in huge economic gains. He was cast as an autocrat, because of his divide-and-rule style. The lack of electoral opposition was thought to have weakened Finnish democracy. But frankly, that is an irrelevance. Under him, Finland had the best GDP per capita. It was a happy, healthy, wealthy country.

Just how did he do that? Kekkonen had, as a reference point, the Winter War, which began when the Soviet Union invaded three months after the outbreak of the Second World War. This was sparked by Finland's refusal to cede border territory, in return for land elsewhere, so the Soviets could ease their security fears for the nearby city of Leningrad.

The Soviets suffered severe losses, as fighting raged in temperatures as low as minus 43 Celsius, but the Finns sued for peace while they still retained some bargaining power. Hostilities ended in March 1940 with the signing of the Moscow Peace Treaty in which Finland ceded 9 percent of its territory while avoiding total subjugation.

That spirit of the difficult compromise endured. Kekkonen was a nimble political operator, pursuing a bold economic policy of embracing European expansion while being careful not to provoke his powerful neighbor. It was so smart that Finland only entered the European Union, along with Austria

and Sweden, on January 1, 1995, eighteen years after the establishment of the former European Economic Community.

Finland only joined NATO in April 2023, eleven months after applying. This might have doubled NATO's presence on Russian borders, but there was none of the hostility toward their membership, compared to that shown toward Ukraine, whose nonalignment strategy ended in 2014. When, in 2020, Zelenskyy's new security strategy reinforced NATO membership as a primary foreign and security policy objective, the Russian bear sharpened its claws.

To Putin, Ukraine is Russia. They are bonded historically by a common language and a shared Orthodox Christian faith. In order to try to understand the man, I studied videos and transcripts of his speeches on the subject. I reproduce the opening section of one such polemic, from July 2021, not to legitimatize what many would consider propaganda, but to give an insight into his mind-set:

> When I was asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, I said that Russians and Ukrainians were one people—a single whole. These words were not driven by some short-term considerations or prompted by the current political context. It is what I have said on numerous occasions and what I firmly believe. I therefore feel it necessary to explain my position in detail and share my assessments of today's situation.
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> First of all, I would like to emphasize that the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time.
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> But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity. The formula they apply has been known from time immemorial—divide and rule. There is nothing new here. Hence the attempts to play on the "national question" and sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another.
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> To have a better understanding of the present and look into the future, we need to turn to history. Certainly, it is impossible to cover in this article all the developments that have taken place over more than a thousand years. But I will focus on the key, pivotal moments that are important for us to remember, both in Russia and Ukraine.
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> Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory—from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov—were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today.

He went on, in great length and exhaustive historical detail, to highlight the "complex and multidimensional nature" of a common history. Independent historians may have challenged the accuracy of his analysis,

and the veracity of his views, but to his supporters he is consistent, clear and convincing in his beliefs.

A couple of months after President Putin's polemic was published, in September 2021, President Zelenskyy took a contrasting approach, during an address to the United Nations General Assembly, in which he criticized the international community's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and, in supporting calls for the reform of the UN, referred to it as "a retired superhero."

He suggested international inaction would "lead to the collapse of the entire architecture of international relations. We will no longer have any rules other than might is right. It will be a world where, instead of collective efforts, selfishness will dominate; a world with more and more dictatorships, less equality, less democracy and freedom."

He praised those UN members "who are not ashamed that Ukraine is their friend and partner. Who can call things by their names, call occupation occupation, and call aggression aggression, without fear that someone will leave this hall for everyone to see." He highlighted the reported issuing of more than six hundred thousand Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens in the east of the country over the previous two years: "Isn't this evidence of an international crime? Isn't it proof of impunity and disrespect for international law?"

In my view, instead of lecturing the international community, and punching the Russian bear, he would have been better employed reaching out to his adversary. I appreciate that, in the United States in particular, the majority of those who argue on Israel's behalf commonly compare us to Ukraine, but I see things a little differently.

The only similarity between us is that we are small countries under threat from tough neighbors or, as in our case, associated terrorists. Under those circumstances, you have to rely on yourselves. The reality is no one will come to help. No one will fight for you. In Ukraine's case, not a single NATO soldier will be sacrificed to save a Ukrainian baby. In fact, I even doubt that NATO members would fight for one another.

Some nations will send armaments, others will not. Some will impose sanctions, others will not. Some will support you diplomatically, others will not. Some will say it is too expensive to support you, others simply won't care. This is not merely a bleak summary of our modern world; in Israel, we still remember the events of 1973.

Henry Kissinger, a proud Jew, was a great supporter of Israel, but during the Yom Kippur War he delayed the airlift of supplies to the Israeli military, that President Nixon had ordered, with the chilling words, “Let them bleed.” He threatened to allow the UN to impose sanctions on us, and subsequently recommended to President Ford that he should pressure Israel by threatening to stop the supply of American weapons.

When you are so vulnerable, you have to appreciate your friends and understand your enemies instinctively. Instead of making emotional speeches on the world stage, talk to your enemy. Go to negotiate. Do what must be done.

As head of the Mossad, I had a vested interest in understanding different cultures, since as an operative I was constantly merged into them. I knew my survival depended on wearing the right costume when you go into a different room. Very few politicians lack an instinctive appreciation of what is going on, on the other side.

Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, is a genius at doing so. Bill Clinton too. Ronald Reagan entered the Russian rooms as if he were Lenin’s son-in-law. He carried his cherished American values close to his heart but he didn’t exercise them publicly. He was masterful, speaking of “us” and “we,” rather than “you” and “me.”

Menachem Begin, the flintiest of personalities, was subtle and humble in his approach to Anwar Sadat concerning a peace treaty. There was no sense of superiority or entitlement. You do not impose your own history, stories, values, assets, and founding principles on the other side. Appreciate this is theirs, this is ours. How do we communicate?

When that happens, wonderful things can be achieved. Especially now, writing this as war rages, I remember the tears that ran down my cheeks as I sat on the South Lawn of the White House while the Abraham Accords Declaration was signed on September 15, 2020. Despite subsequent events, it was a moment of purity, hope, and quiet pride that a discreet, under-the-radar approach had flourished to the point of history.

It has yet to be realized, but in officially sanctioning a shared vision of peace and prosperity, based on interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue, the United States, Israel, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco were at least opening up the possibility of a new era. The simultaneous separate peace agreements signed with the UAE and Bahrain were Israel’s first with an Arab nation in twenty-six years.

The declaration, symbolically named after a patriarchal figure in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, is one of the great legacies of President Trump's administration. The brokerage of Jared Kushner, Avi Berkowitz, Jason Greenblatt, and Mike Pompeo was dogged and driven by a deeply felt sense of opportunity.

Bibi was one of the signatories to the declaration, together with President Trump, Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani and Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. As the ceremonies were enacted, I sensed the spirit of two other men, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE and the ruler of Abu Dhabi, and Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the king of Bahrain.

Their leadership and brotherhood were profound. I was humbled by their decision to work in partnership, and grateful for the subtle support of their senior officials during what was almost a year of delicate, but determined, preparatory work. It was important for my country, but I also felt it was the right thing for the Mossad to be actively, if secretly, involved. It proved my organization is prepared to fight for peace.

It is ultimately incidental that, in addition to worldwide appreciation, my role has been recognized by the state of Israel. I know what I did. I know what our regional allies think about our work at that time. I know Bibi knows what I did.

It simply needed to be done. I remain optimistic that the Middle East has more leaders with the requisite vision and bravery. I truly believe in the principle that the Mossad has to create secret relationships, and nurture them up to the point of incorporation into formal peace treaties and agreements. The sort of momentum that led to subsequent understandings with Sudan and Morocco, whose King Mohammed VI was particularly committed and supportive, can be sustained by careful, mature mediation.

Of course, I am a realist. National self-interest is at the heart of any alliance. It is good to find large swaths of common ground, but to be blunt, if there are areas in which individual interests are prioritized, who cares? I have my own agenda; you have yours. This is the way of things.

The US is not looking at us, seeking validation at any price. They, like all nations, are looking to get what they want from their international relationships. To reinforce the point, I repeatedly told my ministers, as director of the Mossad, that we can't be shy about our stance on any given issue.

Transactions have to be handled in a measured, sophisticated manner in pursuit of mutual benefits, but don't enter discussions prioritizing what the potential partner needs; concentrate instead about what our policy requires. I will respectfully ask for this concession in return for that opportunity. That's diplomacy.

In times of crisis, the world needs leaders with the boldness, fortitude and foresight of US President Woodrow Wilson, who at the end of the First World War unveiled his Fourteen Points as a potential guideline for the rebuilding of the postwar world.

This involved the dismantling of European empires, the creation of new states, open diplomacy without secret treaties, a reduction in armaments, free trade and, crucially, the acceptance of a League of Nations, offering "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small nations alike."

Unfortunately, Wilson was a prophet without honor in his own country. He suffered a stroke, and in a climate in which compromise was seen as weakness, the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles, and the centrality of the League of Nations, which, despite some successes in the 1920s and '30s, was unable to prevent the rise of Nazism and the Second World War.

Kissinger was directly affected by that failure of statecraft. He lost eleven members of his immediate family, and countless friends, in the Holocaust. His worldview was fashioned by formative experiences before he fled to the US in 1938 with his parents, and by the horror he witnessed, as an American soldier, during the liberation of the concentration camps.

I particularly mourned his death on November 29, 2023, at age one hundred, because we desperately need to find his modern equivalent. I met with him several times, in public and in private. He was a smart and very capable diplomat, a pragmatist with a negotiator's highly trained ability to assess character and detect potential avenues of agreement.

I despair at the current lack of capacity to negotiate, because I believe that high diplomacy, something I practiced for many years as national security adviser and as the head of the Mossad, is essential not only for the state of Israel, but for the entire world.

Though I still regard the US as the one true superpower, Russia is supported by China, Iran, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Indonesia, and maybe Malaysia. Compare that to the three European members of the P5+1, France, Germany, and the UK. The first two nations have a low degree of

influence, even in Europe. Despite persistent pretensions of empire, the UK has minimal global impact.

China is a rising force, a new actor, a very serious player. The world cannot ignore it but also has to determine a cohesive policy toward it. Who can tell me the definitive global approach to Beijing? I fear I would wait a long time for an answer. That lack of clarity is symptomatic of a modern leadership disease. Some nations have yet to form a policy in this area. In others, not having a policy is their policy, because they tell you there is no one to negotiate with. With the greatest respect, that's not the point. Find a way.

The stronger, wiser leader understands the power of compromise. Be pragmatic within the bounds of reason, but it cannot only be your way, or mine. Life isn't black and white; its essence lies in the gray areas that contain the greatest hope for mankind, and the capacity to ensure your homeland's safety and future.

Chapter 15

New World Order

I try consciously to cultivate professional detachment from the people and places I come across in my line of work. I can respect the eminence of an individual without being overawed, and admire the history and splendor of the setting without being distracted. Some days, however, are more memorable than most.

I will never forget my first visit to the Kremlin, and my introduction to Vladimir Putin. I was accompanying Bibi Netanyahu as his newly appointed national security adviser, and my prime minister was determined to present me in the proper fashion. "Mr. President," he intoned. "This is my new national security adviser, Mr. Yossi Cohen, who was the deputy director of the Mossad."

He was about to start detailing my background when I noticed a wry smile creasing our host's mouth. We locked eyes and shared an unspoken understanding that, in our different ways, we were products of a world of unrevealed secrets, unwavering vision, and unashamed cunning. Each of us knew our way around the maze of the human condition.

"Mr. Prime Minister," I said, taking the liberty of interrupting him. "You don't need to introduce me. He knows everything about me." Putin's instinctive laugh set everyone at ease, and set the tone of our working relationship. Ever since then, because of our common credentials in the intelligence community, he has referred to me as his *kolléga*, his colleague, or Коллега, to use the Cyrillic script.

Since the security apparatus and the mechanics of state are closely intertwined it is no surprise that someone of his pedigree has risen to a position of such power. According to his official biography, he joined the KGB on graduating from the law faculty at Leningrad's State University.

Though some details of his activities at the height of the cold war are indistinct, he served the organization at an increasingly senior level, mainly in counterintelligence, for sixteen years until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

He served as head of the FSB, Russia's principal security agency, which was the successor organization to the Soviet Union's KGB, until 1999, and has been either Russia's prime minister or president since then. Just as the military influence on our government tells you a lot about the nature of Israel, Putin's intelligence background reveals much about the nature of Russia, and his worldview.

A couple of years later, when I had taken charge of the Mossad, the prime minister asked me to request a private meeting with President Putin, and a translator, without the usual retinue of officials. When I asked why he wouldn't go, to give the visit the authority of his office, he replied, "They won't listen to me." The president sent a message that "of course" I should come. "You're a kolléga. Head of FSB. Head of Mossad. Nice." It proved to be a mutually beneficial exercise.

We had a couple of meetings privately. Those meetings with President Putin provided an important lesson in a leader's thinking.

I do not condone what Putin has done. I do not accept his pursuit of a ruinous nationalistic war in Ukraine. I do not defend his position, but I can explain it. That's a tough mission, particularly in America, where he is perceived in black and white, as a bad guy. It's much more complicated than that.

Like the Jewish people, Russians are chained to history. Invaded by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the country lived constantly on the precipice of war, and stationed huge armies on the borders. Moscow was, nevertheless, burned and sacked by the Crimean and Ottoman army in 1571. Autocracy, often brutally imposed, became a part of the national consciousness and experience over hundreds of years.

Whether we like it or not, we need to have a greater understanding of his motivations. When Putin goes to war, he does not necessarily do so because he is an imperialist. It strikes me that he is a chess player, a grand master with an innate ability to exploit Western weakness. He watches carefully and thinks several moves ahead.

In February and March 2014, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula, part of Ukraine, and then annexed it following a disputed referendum. What

did the West do? Nothing, apart from protesting its legitimacy. The West was similarly content to allow the Donbas war, waged by pro-Russian separatists from April 2014, to stagnate into deadly futility. Crucially, there was no concerted response when aerial photographs captured huge convoys headed toward the border in 2021.

Putin saw historical precedence in his refusal to allow Ukraine to join NATO, and by implication having arguably the world's biggest and strongest army, drawn from thirty-two nations, on Russia's doorstep. He calculated that there was no stomach for sacrifice. He knows no one is coming for him, because the implications of intervention are daunting.

Is it our war, or not? I'm being cynical here, but it takes more than the confiscation of a few yachts, private jets, and luxury apartments to act as a deterrent against expansionism. I understand the emotional pull to arm the Ukrainians, but my strategic view is that it is not the solution.

Why? Putin simply has access to more armaments. He cannot produce them all by himself, but he has help, from China, Iran. "What happens now?" to repeat a question I asked a senior member of the US administration, over a dinner with a similarly influential figure from the UAE, in Washington, DC, in the early stages of the conflict.

His answer has stayed with me: "In a year or so you will be asking me the same question again. Thousands will have died, and the situation will remain the same." The conflict is now in its third winter; the pessimism underpinning that statement seems tragically prescient. We live in a world of bitter contradictions.

Be under no illusion. Bashar al-Assad is a monster. He deserves to be damned for eternity for the crime of killing his own Syrian people with chemical weapons. Propped up on the one hand by Russia, and on the other by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, he was regarded as the great survivor of the Middle East until his regime fell in December 2024.

He fled to Moscow, as fighters led by Abu Mohammed al-Julani swept aside five decades of dictatorship in little less than a week. For Iran, Assad's fall marked the loss of its land bridge to the eastern Mediterranean. It was a further huge blow to its proxies, particularly Hezbollah, which was pushed to the edge of destruction during its conflict with Israel.

We acted decisively and devastatingly in the immediate aftermath of regime change, destroying Syria's ammunition depots, chemical weapon facilities, naval capabilities, and air defense systems in addition to entering

a United Nations–patrolled buffer zone that separated Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights.

This was prudent, since such a significant transfer of power, in as troubled a place as the Middle East, was likely to be messy. No one could predict, with any certainty, how Al-Julani, the nom de guerre adopted by Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, would act as interim president. He was using the right words after taking over, but the state of Israel was not taking any risks. Syria was neutralized militarily. Logically, the Turks benefitted strategically from events. They are no friends of Israel, but I, for one, am not worried about them being an especially malign influence in our terms, since their priority remains their campaign against the Kurds.

Before the Assad regime fell, there were discussions about the merits of intervention. Ultimately, due to the uncertainties of the situation, there was consensual agreement that regime change could have been counterproductive.

Such realpolitik protects mass murderers. The Americans, similarly, pulled back from the brink in 2012, despite the outrage of President Obama, who spoke movingly of "men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas" and of "a father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk." He asked Congress for permission to sanction, with a proper invitation made by the West, a surgical strike on the Assad regime. It was never received.

The Russians moved into the vacuum, pursuing their own strategic ends by taking out fifty-year leases on two major ports, Latakia and Tartus, where the only Mediterranean naval base for their Black Sea fleet is located, on its northern edge. Such access is logistically invaluable; when I asked him to expand on his motivations, Putin stressed the commercial opportunities in Syria's oil, gas, and mining sectors. Russian companies were also given contracts to build flour mills and water-pumping stations.

It seemed smart business, without any sense of sentimental or ideological commitment to Assad. When I raised the potential for regime change with him, Putin merely answered: "Do you have a replacement?" At that time, the prospect of a popular uprising appeared remote. The sudden shift in dynamics weakened the Russians and left them scrambling to protect as many assets as it could.

Hezbollah's role in Syria is an enlightening case study. Its military operations there, dictated by an Iranian agenda, had been denounced across

the Arab world since 2012. The following year, the influential cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, founding chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, condemned Hezbollah as “the party of Satan.” His stance received significant support from the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz Al Sheikh.

The Syrian problem festered since the 1970s and ’80s, when the Russians (Soviets) were active. Syria built its strategic air power and developed long-range missile capabilities, most prominently through Scud B, C, and D programs, which date back to the 1960s. These posed a primary threat to Israel because their warheads could accommodate chemical or biological agents. We were aware they were in production, and being held by the Syrian Army.

Iran and Syria have fundamental differences, in being theocratic (the former) and secular (the latter), with Shiite and Sunni majorities respectively, yet had been allies for more than four decades. A mutual defense pact was signed in 2006 and strengthened the following year. A form of trilateral cooperation featuring the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Quds Force, under the command of Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in a US drone strike in Iraq in 2020, posed an obvious risk.

We know that, with the assistance of the IRGC, the Syrians conspired against Israel in a range of ways. The escalation can be traced back to the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center, which is better known by its French name, Le Centre d’Études et de Recherches Scientifiques, or CERS. Though formed in 1971, it represented a contemporary threat that had to be neutralized.

Despite denials, this government agency, which had a nominal responsibility for coordinating and institutionalizing scientific advances in the civilian sector, and overseeing economic and social development, had long since been given a military dimension. Reports began to circulate of production plants for sarin, VX, and mustard gas in five cities, all ostensibly civilian outlets.

The United States Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on 271 CERS employees following the 2017 Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, in which around 100 people died when an airstrike by government forces was followed by mass poisoning from toxic gas, said to include sarin. Every strategic capability, from rockets to encryption expertise, could be laid at its door.

The Americans are obviously aware of our links to President Putin, who was the first Kremlin leader to visit Israel when he met Ariel Sharon in 2005. He also met President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu in Jerusalem in 2012, and made a one-day visit to Jerusalem in 2020, to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. When I walked into the White House, soon after my introduction to him, Susan Rice, President Obama's national security adviser, remarked tartly, "How are your Russian friends, Yossi?"

"They are not my friends," I replied. "I work with them to improve Israel's defense."

That was the unvarnished truth. Israel may be criticized in the US and Europe for failing to supply armaments to Ukraine, but the need to maintain good relationships with Russia is paramount. It is not our war to enter.

What am I expected to do? Criticize Putin in some sort of moral frenzy, or negotiate with him in good faith? I chose the latter each and every time, since we needed his practical support of our plans to operate in Syria, most notably in attempting to neutralize the arms route that stretched from Iran, through Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon.

I visited the Kremlin to explain, in detail, how and why we had to hit that route because of the weapons finding their way to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, within Syria, and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Putin followed my logic, proposed that our respective deputy chiefs of staff open up a red line every time we intended to attack, and gave his blessing.

That permission, to strike at the interests of his partners in Iraq as well as Syria, was essential, since the Russians operate S300 and S400 air defense systems that can strike at aircraft flying at up to thirty kilometers, or 98,000 feet, high. We cannot risk the beautiful F-35s the Americans give us, so we cannot be shy about our best interests.

The Russians are tough negotiators, as I discovered, as leader of the Israeli delegation, in dealing with Sergey Lavrov, who has been minister of foreign affairs for twenty years, and his team during the JCPOA nuclear arrangements, which we worked so hard to derail. Yet once a degree of trust has been established, there is also room for intelligent, beneficial movement.

I was our prime minister's special envoy to the Kremlin on a range of different issues, and found President Putin to be a great listener, an incisive negotiator, and a supremely agile thinker. No matter how complex the

situation, he repeatedly had the presence of mind, and the breadth of understanding, to look at things from every conceivable angle, and to come up with a solution of breathtaking, almost audacious, simplicity. He made a series of telling points and made a series of complementary moves to foster complementary goals that I have never forgotten.

I still have faith that Saudi Arabia will emerge as Israel's most influential partner in the Middle East. Its relations with Russia date back to its original status as the Kingdom of Hejaz and the Sultanate of Nejd. In 1926, six years before the Saudi state was formalized, the Soviet Union became the first nation to establish diplomatic relations with it, in part to stand up to the influence of the UK.

In modern terms, relations between two nations who account for around a quarter of the world's crude oil production between them have been strengthened under Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. They are pledged to use their influence to maximum mutual benefit, in cooperating closely in oil export decisions as leaders of the OPEC+ group.

They were expected to become a full member of the BRICS intergovernmental group on January 1, 2024, following an invitation driven by the Russians, but, in another example of the independence of thought that defines MBS, as he is colloquially known, they only participate as an invited member, having requested more time to assess the ramifications of full membership.

BRICS, a combination of fast-growing economies, which has expanded to include Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, is another indication of a shift in global emphasis. In human financial and territorial terms, the BRICS nations have huge reach. They have a third of global GDP and a combined population in excess of 3.3 billion. As an obvious geopolitical rival to the G7, they are a challenge to the Western order.

The world no longer turns on a US/Russia axis, though each superpower wields immense influence. There isn't a pure split, a definable and decisive shift of influence and authority, but a new world order is forming. It's more of a mixture of nations, each one pursuing its own interests, occasionally within loose regional coalitions.

Gulf states have been united theoretically since the Gulf Cooperation Council was established in Riyadh in May 1981. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman,

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE have much in common, given their geographic proximity, and similar political systems based on Islamic beliefs, but there are limits to their brotherhood.

Some states, like Kuwait, Qatar, and Morocco, refused to normalize relations with Damascus. Yet others followed Saudi Arabia's lead in recognizing the legitimacy of Assad's government by opening formal links that carried the ultimate promise of economic support. This played into the cultural imperative that Arab nations are best placed to solve an Arab issue.

In a wider sense, MBS is balancing Saudi Arabia's strategic alliance with the United States with the shorter-term benefits of a relationship with the Chinese, who acted as mediators in their restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran in the spring of 2023. The "comprehensive strategic agreement" with President Xi Jinping in December of that year has led to the formation of partnerships in such areas as artificial intelligence, smart cities and renewable energy.

China's blueprint for regional interconnectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative, involves investment in more than 150 countries and international organizations. The centerpiece of Xi's foreign policy, it encompasses six urban development corridors, with road and rail links linked to a digital infrastructure. The so-called Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road involves port development projects along Indo-Pacific sea routes through Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

This complements Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, MSB's strategic push to diversify the kingdom's economy in an attempt to reduce its reliance on oil. This involves five so-called Giga projects, including Neom, a new $500 billion cognitive city, and promises to stimulate far-reaching social and economic change.

The Americans, meanwhile, have sought to build on the goodwill generated by the memorandum of understanding, signed in September 2023, that provides a framework for the transit of renewable electricity and clean energy through the Kingdom, connecting the continents of Asia and Europe.

The United States has established new diplomatic centers in Jeddah and Dhahran and is committed to building a new embassy in Riyadh. Counterterrorism, security, economic collaboration, and innovation in the creation of new energies have been on the agenda. The Saudi defense establishment, the largest outlet for US military sales, is committed to the

development of an integrated and regionally networked air and missile system. Their interests align with ours, but not exclusively so. Frankly, if MBS judges that it is advantageous to establish a partnership with the Moon, he will do so.

I get the sense the Saudis do not wish to become a military superpower, though they have nuclear ambitions, and are understandably conscious of the threat posed by the Iranians, their large and turbulent neighbors. A deal with them represents sensible statecraft, since memories of the seventeen-minute strike on two state-owned Aramco oil installations by eighteen drones and three low-flying missiles in September 2019, described by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as "an act of war" by Iran, are fresh. They lost 50 percent of their production capacity on that one night.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the uniqueness of individual relationships. I have had to be aware of different dispositions, appreciate contrasting priorities. I deepened my trust in my friends, and my mistrust of my enemies, while encouraging tolerance by refusing to be judgmental. Live your life. I won't criticize you, because it's your prerogative. I can accept you the way you are. However, if you turn your power against my people, you'll find me fighting you fiercely.

You do not go to lecture MBS on values. You do not frame arguments with old-world conventions. Like many leaders in the Middle East, a crucible of conflict and enforced change for centuries, he is affronted by the lazy, outdated, and culturally insulting assumption that Western values, whatever they be, are somehow inherently superior.

Where are lines drawn in history to prove that point? Precisely which values are accepted as a supposed norm? With which nations are they associated, since there are skeletons in everyone's cupboards? To Arab sensibilities, the American Civil War is unthinkable, since an Arab brother would never fight his brother in defense of slavery. The British butchered in pursuit of Empire. Millions have died in the name of Christianity. The Crusades and the cruelties of the Inquisition were expressions of inhumanity.

Our prime minister is the son of a historian, Benzion Netanyahu, yet his lack of personal chemistry with regional leaders undermines his status in the Middle East and emphasizes a recurring flaw in his premiership. Formal dialogue is obviously problematic, due to Saudi Arabia's historic opposition to the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine and the absence of formal

diplomatic relations between us since the state of Israel was created, so it is vital to keep any feasible channel of communication open.

This, after all, is the essence of macro politics and high diplomacy. I, for one, have never taken my eye off the prize, the transformational impact of a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Though blocked by war, and decades of suspicion and hostility, it remains a gateway to the future.

I pray it will not be another false dawn. There have been too many of those in our part of the world over the past century or so, since General Edmund Allenby led the British occupation of Jerusalem in December 1917, promising to "open a new era of brotherhood and peace in the Holy Land."

MBS has an ability to clarify complex issues with a single, often challenging, phrase. I once asked him, at a predawn meal, to expand on his solution to the Palestinian problem. "What is yours?" he replied, with a knowing smile. It was a telling intervention, since I couldn't frame a cogent answer. We do not have a clear response to that. There are no certainties about Israel's intentions, though public opinion in our nation is hardening.

All nations have a duty to help themselves by reacting to fluctuating political moods, diplomatic opportunities, and economic needs. The Chinese and Indians, for example, simply ignore sanctions on Russia. In that context, the close relationship between the crown prince and President Putin, fostered since the first visit to Moscow by MBS in 2015, is instructive and, in many ways, inevitable. They are men of substance.

Putin made a point of publicly thanking him for helping to facilitate the biggest US-Russian prisoner swap since the cold war in August 2024. The deal, worked on secretly for more than a year, was eased by MBS and other unnamed Arab neighbors, especially in its early stages. It resulted in the repatriation of eight Russians and sixteen Americans, including journalist Evan Gershkovich and former US Marine Paul Whelan.

The late Henry Kissinger was promoting the benefits of mediation in his final days. He was insistent that someone had to go and speak to Putin, to work out the parameters of a potential peace plan in Ukraine. In his pomp, he would have been a perfect candidate.

Who is today's honest broker? Who can be sent? Offer me someone. Tell me the country that individual would come from. Could it be a representative of a NATO member? Hardly. That's thirty-two nations out of

the running. Could it be an American? The Russians have in the past had no respect for the United States. A senior Chinese figure, acting on behalf of Xi Jinping? Possibly. An influential Indian? They're not interested in being drawn further in, but maybe. A Brazilian envoy? Who knows?

I was approached several times as a potential mediator, but I didn't get the right phone calls from both sides to feel comfortable. I would have done so happily and hopefully successfully if those had been forthcoming. Whoever it is, someone has to make the connection, and soon. Someone has to cut the deal. Who better to be the catalyst than the forty-seventh president of the United States, Donald Trump?

Chapter 16

The Special Relationship

There is no better time, or place, to clarify your worldview than when you are taking shelter from an Iranian missile attack beneath a road bridge in central Tel Aviv. There is a terrible beauty to what appears to be a malign meteor shower, and everyone, drivers from around a dozen cars, and passengers from two buses, is waiting for the dull thud of detonation.

In the distance, a motorbike accelerates noisily to apparent safety. Sirens wail, but suddenly we are aware of explosions. I count them out loud in Hebrew. *Akhat* . . . *shta'im* . . . *shalosh* . . . *arba*. One . . . two . . . three . . . four. The implications of a failure to intercept the majority of the group of six projectiles are obvious. The Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow 3, our missile protection systems, are fallible. We are vulnerable.

I am recognized by other people, so the chatter under the bridge quickly concentrates on the nature of Israel's revenge, but I am thinking strategically, rather than operationally. My mind goes back to the last official conversation I had with Joe Biden, at the White House with Bill Burns, the CIA director, just before I left the Mossad. We covered most of the subjects critical to Israel's security, including Iran's nuclear and surface-to-surface missile capabilities.

We also discussed Russia, China, and Iraq before the president said, "Well, Yossi. So, we are best friends, but we may have disagreements."

I then told Biden, "Mr. President, we need you. We need you to represent our views and our needs. We are a small state. Extremism is rising in the jungle around us. Hate is rising. The USA is our best friend on Earth. Iran is getting stronger."

That reality is reinforced as I wait out the onslaught under that bridge some three and a half years later, on the evening of October 1, 2024.

Kamala Harris has replaced Biden as the Democrats' choice in the presidential election, and we know the family of nations will not rush to Israel's aid should worse come to worst. We can only rely on the help and strategic support of the Americans to survive in the Middle East.

To underline the point, it took little more than two weeks after the attack for the Americans to send its most advanced antimissile battery, the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) System to Israel, together with around one hundred soldiers to operate it. Each battery consists of six truck-mounted launchers, forty-eight interceptors, radio and radar equipment. It is capable of hitting targets between one hundred fifty and two hundred kilometers away.

We have a saying in the Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law, that a sword can only be sharpened on its sister sword. When we are worried about the same stuff, and trying to find solutions for a given situation, we are united by more than that which divides us.

The relationship with the US touches the bones of our existence. When an American administration eventually decides on something, it has echoes that carry to Jerusalem and, in the case of the Mossad, Tel Aviv. If there are disagreements, or a divergence of opinions, there is a very important strategic layer to the relationship.

When we do create a policy, we must ensure it is communicated clearly and correctly to the White House. Rightly, this does not mean it will always be accepted, but we will be listened to. We have to keep our lines and channels of communication open, regardless of the identity of the incumbent. Do that, and I believe we can agree on more than 90 percent of our mutual policies to create a better world.

The bottom line is that we cannot take positive responses and sentiments for granted. We have to work on what is truly a special relationship, because we are totally dependent on the USA. Some people might not want to hear that, but it is a reality that must be acknowledged and acted upon. We can no longer do things alone.

When you buy F-35s, they must be maintained by the Americans. It's a long-term deal. Our F-16s are forty years old, and you cannot replace a screw without their approval. We can survive sanctions by the UK, France, Italy and the rest, but we cannot afford to alienate our biggest ally. We need

them to speak up for us, veto UN security council resolutions, because no one else will.

I worked directly with three US presidents, two Democrats and one Republican, but was always strictly bipartisan. I should not take a side. That's why I had an identical message prepared for Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, when America's fate became clear on November 6, 2024. I called to celebrate the election of the forty-seventh president, to look forward to their installation the following January, and to express my hope he would help Israel deal with its most urgent problem, Iran.

From a personal point of view, I welcomed the prospect of a second term for President Trump, believing it represented the beginning of a new chapter for the Middle East. I know him as a man of trenchant opinion and decisive action. I hope my relationship with him and his people, the most compelling and supportive team in his first administration, will continue to flourish.

In the buildup to the election, I grew accustomed to questions about whether President Biden was a friend of Israel. I first knew him as vice president to Barack Obama, visiting Jerusalem when I was NSA, and believe unequivocally that he is. He often quotes David Ben-Gurion, our first prime minister, who said that "the world stands with Israel so that the dream of generations will be fulfilled."

He was one of the first leaders to come to Israel after October 7, literally hugging Bibi Netanyahu and our president, Isaac Herzog, on the tarmac at the airport, but the relationship with the prime minister was difficult. Our prime minister, and Ron Dermer, his American-born minister of strategic affairs, are temperamentally suited to working with a Republican administration. That reflects their formative influences and similar backgrounds.

Bibi moved to Philadelphia with his family when he was a teenager and completed his education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dermer gave up his American citizenship when he became economic attaché at the Israeli Embassy in Washington in 2005. He cites Donald Trump's book *The Art of the Deal* as the reason he studied finance and management at the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated magna cum laude.

Personal preferences may be understandable, but they can arouse suspicion and resentment. I well remember how exercised Susan Rice was

when, as President Obama's national security adviser from the start of his second term in office, she believed there had been tacit Israeli support of Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate in 2012.

I had no idea whether that was true. If I had been aware of any such strategy, I would have argued strongly against it, because of my intrinsic respect for any administration, regardless of its ideological outlook. Susan and I argued passionately, but created what I believe to be a very productive relationship, from a governmental and personal standpoint. I appreciated her candor and faith.

I told President Obama of the risks of the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2015, and he replied, "Yossi, you are so wrong." Incidentally, the scene was repeated with President Trump when he took office following the 2016 election. I told him the deal was "so wrong" in principle and practice. He replied: "You're so right. It's the worst deal, ever."

I'm not making a partisan point there. Despite differences in purpose and cause, Susan and I worked positively together during the final phase of negotiations on the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, to give it a more formal, instructive title. We in Israel didn't like the agreement between Iran, the UK, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the US, to say the least, but we at least improved it, in our eyes.

It is always enlightening to consider the person, rather than the political operator. Susan spoke publicly about being influenced by the morality of my faith, and the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. She called the relationship between our peoples "an ironclad bond, a solemn promise that endures from generation to generation."

She remains a staunch opponent of antisemitism, with a strong sense of injustice and understanding of the Jewish experience, linked to her childhood, growing up in the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Shepherd Park in the northwest quadrant of Washington, DC.

Her family home used to belong to the Israeli Embassy; it had a mezuzah, a small, rolled parchment inscribed by a qualified calligraphist with scriptural verses, on its doorframe. She learned prayers from Jewish friends and was welcomed at Passover seders in their homes.

The girl who traveled to Israel with her father and brother at the age of fourteen, visiting a working kibbutz and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, grew into a polished and

impassioned ambassador to the United Nations, where she defended Israel against attacks on its safety and legitimacy.

That bond has a fiscal dimension. She was in post when the latest memorandum of understanding between Israel and the United States was signed in September 2016. This covered the fiscal years from 2019 to 2028, and is worth $38 billion to my country, in annual installments of $3.8 billion, covering military funding and missile defense assistance.

The US spent at least $17.9 billion, a record, on military aid to Israel in the first year of the war in Gaza. An additional $4.86 billion has been invested in enhanced US military operations in the region in the same time frame. That includes the cost of a navy-led campaign against Yemen's Houthis, who claim to be carrying out strikes against commercial shipping in solidarity with another Iranian proxy, Hamas.

Susan returned to the White House as domestic policy adviser to President Biden, a role she relinquished in May 2023. Our last conversation contained one of the most meaningful compliments I have received. "Yossi," she said, "I can tell you one thing. You are a great patriot."

I was similarly fortunate in the nature and capabilities of the four CIA directors I worked with as head of the Mossad, starting with John Brennan in 2016. There were acknowledged differences and tensions on a strategic level at the time, and I was new in my job, but he was excellent.

You have to be aware of differences in approach. You need to be insightful and flexible, because the magic, the central task, is to create a productive relationship with everyone, regardless of nationality or political convictions.

The chemistry between Mike Pompeo and me, when we first met in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, was striking. Mutual respect was obvious, since he had chosen Israel to be his first overseas visit on taking up the post of CIA director following the accession of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth US president, but the stilted protocol that tends to define such contact was cast aside as soon as he walked into a conference room for our breakfast meeting.

He set the tone by making a knowing joke about my supposedly well-groomed appearance. I replied in kind, by playfully praising him for his self-evident wisdom. I knew nothing about him, beyond an impressive CV, and he had little reason to know of me, but he was clearly a kindred spirit.

He had no background in espionage to draw upon, but I knew anyone who had finished first in his class at the US Military Academy at West Point, before leading a cavalry unit patrolling the Soviet border at the height of the cold war, had a real-world view of life.

He graduated from Harvard Law School, forged a successful business career, and became a congressman. I was, by contrast, a one-company guy, but we lived by the same dictum of leadership: craft the vision, take the decision and apply appropriate force and resource to achieve the desired result.

It didn't take long to feel his fire. He reminded me of Meir Dagan. He had a strong sense of right and wrong. He wanted to fight the bad guys and was unafraid of far-reaching resolutions. He appreciated the strategic dimension to his new role but valued action above all else.

We made sure there were no blurred edges. Before he returned home from that initial trip, I invited Mike to meet senior members of our Iran team. This, I stressed to them, was no time for suspicion, surreptitious secrecy, or fragile egos. We were all in. Anyone who was not would be out.

That same message was transmitted by Mike to his team, when I visited the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, soon afterward. He might not have come from the intelligence community, but his grasp of its culture was acute, and his impact was astonishing. This, he insisted, would be a new era of cooperation.

I was not new to the CIA, since I had worked alongside them as deputy director of the Mossad and as Israel's national security adviser. I loved the simplicity and directness of their mission statement: "We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go." It could almost be repeated, word for word, on behalf of the Mossad.

Mike and I put flesh on the bones of that intention. Ours would be a relationship with a beating heart. It would be complementary, clever and courageous. Institutional caution and cloying bureaucracy were to be regarded as the enemies within. There would be no unnecessary obstacles. Leaders at all levels within our organizations would be empowered.

He was as good as his word. Within a year, 40 percent of the decisions traditionally taken by the CIA director would be devolved to those with expertise and experience in the field. He took the biggest decisions, which involved financial, political, and military risk, where lives were at stake, but if the issue was coming across his desk simply "because I'm the next fella

in the chain of command," his involvement was deemed unnecessary, since he felt it would add little value and inevitably slow down the process.

This refreshing approach played into one of my fundamental beliefs, that illusion and hope cannot be a work plan. It is all very well having an internal philosophy, a willingness to do certain things, but if that cannot be translated into a practical plan of action, it achieves nothing and the institution goes nowhere.

We bonded further during a three-day stay at a huge CIA-owned farm complex in the middle of nowhere, which acts as a training base. It was a magnificent place, a big boys' playground, and a melting pot of ideas and intentions.

Our mornings were devoted to the distillation of our central strategy, on Iran, so that it could be communicated to our respective staffs. Mike was fiercely skeptical about Iran's nuclear intentions and, over time, when he became the US secretary of state, proved strong enough to resist persistent external political pressure to underpin a delusional nuclear deal.

Our afternoons were spent racing a variety of vehicles and showing off at the shooting range. Inevitably, it was competitive. In the spirit of companionship and diplomacy, I won't tell you who was the most effective, but let's say Mike took the results in good heart.

He had a thirst for knowledge and perspective. There was something deeper in his motivation, his faith, which struck another chord with me. There would be a powerful philosophical element to our personal and professional relationship as it blossomed.

When he returned to Israel, I rented a private house near Tel Aviv, where we stayed with our wives, Susan and Aya. It was a beautiful time. We realized that our respective religious beliefs and backgrounds, them as Evangelical Christians, and us coming from an Orthodox Jewish tradition, overlapped.

I promised I would give Mike everything he needed. He reciprocated and offered operational and other kinds of support. We pledged to engage in greater depth, to cooperate in a spirit of openness, and exchange views, strategy, and technology, an area in which the US excelled.

We vowed to share whatever we could. In practice, Mike had a large percentage of what I had, and I had, I believe, a large percentage of what he had. That proved to be one thousand percent effective. They developed technologies with us, and for us. We did the same.

I was struck by his clear-eyed view of the CIA's role, succinctly expressed on the first anniversary of his appointment as director, when he addressed the American Enterprise Institute. "I wasn't ready for the breadth, the depth, the scale, the magnitude of the efforts we undertake each and every day as the nation's first line of defense," he admitted.

"If the American people had the capacity to see that—[though] they can't, for good reason—they too would be as proud of the men and women who have joined the CIA as I am. I came to quickly understand, too, that I wasn't going to improve the courage of our officers, the skill set of our officers, though we are working diligently to take it to even the next level.

"But I could see there was a bureaucracy that was preventing them from being unleashed, from doing the very things they were directed, commanded and indeed America needed them to do. I wanted to be part of changing understanding. I wanted to make sure officers appreciated the fact that we were going to have an expectation, nearly every day, that we were going to steal secrets.

"That's what espionage services do. We ask our officers to risk their lives to steal secrets to protect America. It's our fundamental mission. We will never shy away from it, and we do so aggressively and without any apology. It's not enough for me to talk about it. We have to implement it."

The sense of partnership that underpinned those sentiments spread across the first Trump administration. As national security adviser from February 2017 to April 2018, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster was another enlightened and open-minded ally. Our teams would meet in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in the White House compound, framing discussions on common objectives.

The subjects were wide-ranging, from Russia to China, to North Korea and the Middle East. We saw these issues through the prism of one another's attitudes and experience. This enabled a better understanding of complex problems, and tested conclusions we had come to, individually and collectively, based on the reading of a given situation. He was significantly critical of what he called the "serial self-delusion" underpinning the United States' approach to Iran.

Gina Haspel, who was installed as the first permanent female CIA director when Mike Pompeo became secretary of state in April 2018, ensured the transition between them was seamless. I found Gina street-smart, tough, intuitive, and informed by the realities of more than three

decades in intelligence around the world, much of it spent in the Defense Clandestine Service, the undercover arm of the CIA.

Gina's first anniversary address, at Auburn University, contained a touching and artfully formed personal reference, but was more significant for the indication of inclusivity it offered, and for the empathy and humanity it expressed.

"Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda remain squarely in our sights, but we're honing our focus and resources on nation-state rivals," she said. "Additionally, we're applying cutting-edge technologies and tradecraft to allow us to react more quickly to global developments, like targeting a terrorist organization wherever it arises and before it spreads.

"We're making great strides with our foreign partners, those ties are stronger than ever. And let me tell you, our intelligence allies around the world can really open doors and get things done on behalf of our country.

"I frequently meet with my foreign counterparts, either in Washington or over there, and they're generally very interesting characters, for whom I have great regard and even fondness. There's one counterpart who's especially fun to engage, very James Bond-like. He worked his way up through his service, has great spy stories, and is definitely someone you want on your side.

"And when you have partnerships this close and personal, you have colleagues who go out of their way to share with CIA their really good stuff, their best intelligence. And our country is tangibly benefitting from these relationships.

"We're also sending more of our people to the field. Not only case officers, but analysts, technical experts, and others. It all comes down to this: if you have a bigger footprint overseas, you can get more done where it really counts."

Our jobs might occasionally be tangential, but we shared a basic bond, in being responsible for the welfare of those we placed in danger. I identified intensely with her description of the emotions stirred during a visit to CIA officers on a year-long deployment in a war zone:

"Our officers take on jobs that test their mental and physical strength to the fullest. They work seven days a week, often going days without sleep. These officers were so hard working and so motivated by the mission in this dangerous location. I could not have been more impressed with them. Their missions are long and arduous, and the operational tempo can be grueling.

Our nation is asking them to do more every day, and they sacrifice a lot to keep our country safe.

"At the same time, they are not just intelligence officers. They also are devoted fathers and mothers, loving spouses, partners, and companions. Their families sometimes endure long stretches without knowing where their loved ones are, the dangers they might face, or the risks they must take. At times, our achievements come at a terrible cost."

When Gina made that speech, in 2019, forty-two CIA men and women had died in the line of duty since 9/11. There were 140 stars, two and a quarter inches tall by two and a quarter inches wide and half an inch deep, set into the Memorial Wall in the lobby of the agency's original headquarters building. Each represented an officer who has made the ultimate sacrifice.

Every star is set six inches apart from its neighbor, as is each row of stars. The symmetry is stark, and invites us to reflect on what we do, and why we do it. It is literally an unforgettable duty.

Bill Burns, who was succeeded by John Ratcliffe on January 23, 2025, was another CIA director of great substance. He also paid me the greatest honor, on President Biden's recommendation, in giving me the George Tenet Award, named after the man who worked his way up from busboy at the family diner in Little Neck, Queens, to become director between 1997 and 2004.

Director Tenet was another realist. As he was fond of saying, "CIA doesn't do easy—the hard jobs come to us." The citation, which has pride of place on my office wall, speaks of the award recognizing my "steadfast partnership with CIA and unparalleled contributions to joint operations during his five-year tenure as director of the Mossad. His leadership and strategic vision enabled the development and execution of a truly remarkable array of high-impact joint operations that have made the world a safer place for both our countries."

I also cherish an accompanying framed, handwritten note from Bill Burns, in which he says, "I would like to express my personal gratitude for all that you have done to protect both of our great nations. Thank you for the friendship you have shown to the CIA and to America, your dedication to the mission, and your willingness to take on the risks on behalf of both countries. The world is safer because of leaders like you."

Modern nations have very similar structures of decision taking. Someone runs the nation. He or she has a massive responsibility. What a leader has less of is time and patience. You have to be constantly mindful of that and appreciate the parameters of your role. You have to have an inner conviction, an understanding that while you are close to the top of the pyramid, you are not at its tip.

We operated jointly with the Americans on the ground, and that should be taken as a sign of commitment. We worked very closely on things I cannot reveal, to the extreme that I did undertake a mission at the personal request of President Trump.

I met him alone, without my prime minister. He asked whether this super-special operation was feasible, and my response seemed to be reassuring. Once I received permission from Bibi Netanyahu, I did as he asked. The mission was successful. The special relationship demanded nothing less.

Trump is very well liked among leaders in the Middle East, and his installation as the forty-seventh president, in January 2025, was a source of understandable celebration. He may be full of surprises, some of them not very pleasant to our enemies, but he is admired as being street-smart and unconventionally bold.

This was most apparent during the negotiations that delivered the Abraham Accords. Trump played on the desperation and amorality of the Sudanese leadership by tempting them with the prospect of being removed from the blacklist of terrorist states. They were eager to sign an agreement, which was dependent on their formalizing a peace treaty with Israel. They did so, despite their confusion and alarm, but it did them little good.

They were overthrown in a military coup in October 2021. Civil war has been raging, at the cost of at least twenty thousand lives, and the displacement of ten million people since April 2023. Iranian influence, in the supply of surveillance and attack drones to the SAF faction, led by self-styled president Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, is typically pernicious.

The nuances of the US election campaign reflected demographic changes in American society, where around 70 percent of those with Jewish heritage are in mixed marriages. The consequent easing of traditional ties will shape the next generation, but Israel cannot afford to be inhibited about its promotion of its best interests.

Dealing with Iran must set the tone of a new phase of our relationship. I do not doubt the USA's commitment to the defense of Israel, under both administrations, but Trump was more forceful in his promises of support of the war effort against Iran.

What do we need from the new president? I must begin to answer that fundamental question by stressing my belief that he is unfairly maligned, especially in Europe. At the same time I was fighting for peace, during his initial administration, President Trump was a central figure in four peace deals.

Perhaps this will continue over the next four years. Helping to bring about a normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia, as part of the expansion of the Abraham Accords, would be a hugely significant achievement, especially in what it says about the potential for a triangular deal, driven by a strategic relationship between the new US president and Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudi leader, like Trump, is unafraid to raise the bar. He has already signaled his desire to have nuclear capability, for civil rather than military use. Some sort of pact that offers the kingdom the prospect of US support, in the face of Iranian aggression, could be the sort of game changer that confirms the president's long-term legacy.

There will be a huge amount of diplomatic activity, much of it covert, but allow me to be blunt. Assist if you wish, but at least give the go-ahead for us to take out Iranian nuclear sites. Iran must pay a heavy price for their activities and ambitions. Do not, under any circumstances, allow them to negotiate any new nuclear deal. If minds are focussed on the stretch goal, of influencing regime change in Tehran, the world will be a safer place.

Chapter 17

Winning the War, Securing the Peace

Yahya Al-Sinwar. Hassan Nasrallah. Mohammed Deif. Ismail Haniyeh. Fatah Sharif. Ali Karaki. Nabil Qaouk. Mohammed Srur. Ibrahim Qubaisi. Ibrahim Aqil. Ahmed Mahmud Wahbi. Fuad Shukr. Mohammed Nasser. Taleb Abdallah. Saleh al-Arouri. Marwan Issa. Hashem Safieddine. Ahmed Wahabi.

Do not mourn these men as martyrs. They did not die as heroes. They were purely terrorists. As leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, they bathed in rivers of blood. The world remains a perilous place, but it has been cleansed by their extinction. Their names should be recited as reminders that Israel will reach its enemies.

Each death was a milestone, a sign of the shift in momentum of the war Sinwar, the mastermind of October 7, planned and launched before he retreated into the tunnels beneath Gaza. Like Nasrallah, his counterpart in Hezbollah, he lived the life of a rat.

Before analyzing where the neutralization of so many key figures, by a mixture of incisive intelligence, technical innovation, surgical assault, and, in Sinwar's case, an element of random chance, leaves the terrorist organizations they controlled, we need to concentrate on their paymasters. To quote my friend Mike Pompeo: "When we isolate Iran, the region becomes more peaceful and prosperous."

The problem is that Iran avoids isolation because it knows how to speak softly to the West. The danger lies in the way that message is spreading and being listened to because it aligns with other vested interests, pursued by the leaders of the new world order. Iran's diplomatic initiative, launched in the early stages of the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian, complements and camouflages the regime's aggressive intent.

There is a sophistication to their approach, developed over many years and in different phases, that we ignore at our peril. They understand how the three elements of statecraft, politics, and diplomacy, as well as—when necessary—warfare are interlinked and must be used at the right time, and in a prioritized manner. Mindful of the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War, which cost the lives of eight million Iranians, they use others to fight and die, outside their borders, on their behalf.

Iran is the greatest, most enduring threat to the region because of the combination of theology and nationalism. As Shia, they believe the world of Islam belongs to them. Their religious imperative is doubly dangerous because of their people's love for their country. They will sacrifice themselves for the patriotic ideal. It is as if they have been recruited twice, by both Allah and their nation.

The regime does not change. I abhor their mock innocence, their disguise of cynical intent. If you ask me to outline the primary role of defenders of the state of Israel, it is to ensure Iran will never acquire nuclear weapons and never have the scope to conduct a nuclear military program.

The Mossad has a proven capacity to operate in Iran and will not allow them to threaten our existence. The skill and bravery of our pilots, in making retaliatory strikes against their defense capabilities following the attack of October 1, 2024, are humbling confirmations of the humanity behind our technology.

There are other vital operations that I am not, and will never be, at liberty to reveal, but I am often told one of the greatest legacies of my career is the acquisition of their nuclear archive in 2018; I prefer to direct attention to the courage and audacity of the operatives involved. They were game changers. Never again can Tehran's blandishments and diversions be taken at face value.

The archive exposed the fiction that there was no PMD, potential military dimension, to their nuclear program. I gave the IAEA the archive in its entirety. I gave the constituent nations in P5+1, the powers, the same information. I didn't tell them what was in it. I asked them to see for themselves, to assess it independently, and to tell me what they thought about it. They were unanimous in accepting the veracity of the documentation. It was not fake. It cannot be ignored.

Iran, with a complete capacity to enrich, to control the fuel cycle, to assemble long-range precision guided missiles, to continue to hide their true

military intent, would be uniquely dangerous. Let us not forget the scale of the threat to Israel, which is some sixty times smaller in terms of land mass, and around nine times smaller in terms of population. Who gains anything from a wealthy, militarily ambitious Iran having nuclear capabilities?

Not their own people, that is for sure. It will embed corruption, embolden the warmongers. It will help to strengthen the Revolutionary Guards, and the young zealots who form the Basij, the voluntary militia that helps to enforce state control and acts as a morality police force. Modern Iran has echoes of the tyranny of Nazi Germany, or North Korea. An indiscreet word of opposition to the regime in the morning, and you may not be alive when the sun sets.

That taught me the need to develop a deeper understanding of the Iranian psyche. It is a profoundly repressive system, in which no human rights have been preserved. It is economically chaotic, with soaring inflation and widespread unemployment, yet in these times of heightened tension, a 200 percent increase in military spending has been sanctioned. Bombs are prioritized over bread and fresh water.

Why isn't the population, estimated at between eighty-five and ninety million people, ready to rise up? It has logical reason to do so, yet they are almost prisoners of human nature. We tend to be products of our experience and education; a youthful populace, with an average age of 33.4 years, has grown up with the concept of glorious revolution.

In terms of understanding the current situation, it helps to separate the regime from the citizens they oppress. You can't truly define Iranians, just as you can't define Americans, Italians, Brazilians, or Israelis. They are not clones, produced from a cultural mold. They are all different, from one to the other, but those I dealt with had common problems.

Of course, I was undercover when I met Iranians. Most were unaware of my activity. To some, those I wanted to recruit, I was a stranger who became a friend. Some were simple; some were sophisticated, smart. Some were vicious; some were charming. The Mossad chooses its targets well. They have certain traits and capacities, though they can be scientists, statesmen, businessmen, writers, academics. They tend to be united by the feeling that they want a better life.

It may be an educated nation, but the vast majority of Iranian citizens are very poor. They lack basics, such as a reliable water supply, and live in overcrowded conditions. They are controlled, intimidated, browbeaten.

They are executed in public, on cranes. Even those that I would categorize as being religious do not like what they see being done in the name of Islam, in the name of Allah.

When ideology and theology cannot be separated, it removes any sense of accountability. If there is a national disaster, it is not the leadership's fault, but the will of Allah. This acceptance of a higher power is nonnegotiable. We are here to carry out the prophet's wishes, expressed through earthly representatives. Do we care if we die or suffer daily? No.

Go onto the streets of Tehran and ask ordinary Iranians whether they are aware of the reasons for sanctions, and try to explain the regime's nuclear obsession. It's fascinating. There is a network of gossip, but essentially they are kept in the dark and know little beyond personal experience. The world's displeasure is an abstract exercise that they have difficulty in comprehending unless it is linked to the certainties of their daily struggle, and the realities of repression.

Water dripping onto a stone may very well end up eroding it over a long period of time, yet a cascade of resentment and frustration cannot break down fear. People are saying privately they've had enough, but what can they do? The regime holds all the power. It's a terrible country; I believe that after North Korea, the one remaining old-style dictatorship, where the populace is enslaved and starving, it is the worst nation in the world in which to live.

Despite the hijab demonstrations during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement of 2022, the spirit of defiance has all but disappeared due to the fear generated by institutionalized intimidation. Online surveillance is insidious, and effective. Arbitrary arrests continue. Widespread accusations of the weaponization of sexual violence have never been pursued and punished, despite their plausibility. The use of the death penalty has soared.

The pretext for such oppression is perilous, not just for Israel, or the region, but for the world. In the eyes of the regime, they are translating God's will. They are following celestial orders. Following that reasoning, to the Iranians, Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas political leader assassinated in Tehran after attending the inauguration of Iranian president Pezeshkian, is an angel, a saint, a commander who deserved a funeral fit for a hero.

The rhetoric during the launch of an official three-day period of mourning, that "his blood will never be wasted" was predictable, but reinforced the need for reflection. It seems incredible even to consider, but

many outside Iran were willing to take a ruthless terrorist like Haniyeh into their hearts. The world has to understand what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

It makes you wonder what is wrong with humankind. As my wife is fond of saying, there are times I think it may have been better if God had stopped his labors on the fifth day, when he created birds and sea creatures. The people turned up the following day with land creatures. Do we deserve the world the Almighty created for us?

I am not one for idle fantasies, but I occasionally allow myself the indulgence of wondering what I would say to Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, given the most unlikely opportunity. He would doubtlessly regard me as the devil incarnate, so there would be nothing to be lost from challenging him directly.

Learn to live, however uncomfortably, with the state of Israel, because we are not going anywhere. Protect your interests but abandon state-sponsored terrorism. Accept the peace dividend. Share the economic benefits with your citizens. A stable, refocused Iran would quickly claim a place among the world's top-five exporters of oil and gas, if not in the top three.

Would he listen? Hell might have to freeze over before he does so. He would probably describe himself as a humble servant of higher powers, rather than an embittered old man. Controlling such a huge, combustible nation for the past thirty-five years is an incredible achievement, but the fact remains that he is eighty-five. Presumably, he is not immortal. As we learned in mid-November 2024, he has already nominated his successor, his son Mojtaba.

We have an obligation to look at a scenario where he announces that Allah has let it be known to him that apocalyptic action is required, in the form of a destructive war. I have thought for some time that the Iranians are between two to three years from producing a nuclear device, if they go down that path, but I have invested half of my life in ensuring that prospect cannot happen.

I'm not saying that it won't, or they can't commit to a conflict of such magnitude, but I can rationalize the nuclear sabre rattling. You acquire weapons of mass destruction because of their deterrent effect. In other words, don't push me because I might just be crazy enough to use them. Do

you want me to kill two hundred thousand people with a single bomb? Try me. In the immortal words of Clint Eastwood: “Feel lucky, punk?”

It is possible to disappear into the most frightening of rabbit holes. I do not believe a nuclear war will happen, but if it did the planet would not be destroyed. For the sake of argument, and without any implication, let us imagine Pakistan is effectively wiped off the map by a nuclear assault, spearheaded by several bombs that obliterated their most populous cities, Karachi and Lahore.

The damage would be catastrophic, and the loss of life in a nation of 250 million people unthinkable, but would anyone seriously risk further conflagration by retaliating on their behalf? This might be a depressing commentary on the cynicism that shapes our world, but I very much doubt it. Life would continue with a damning degree of normality.

This is not 1945, when the US was the only nation that possessed the ultimate weapon. Other nations have nuclear capacity. It is understandable on one level that Iran should want to take out that insurance, to guard against being drawn into conventional war, but we cannot take the risk of them having that option.

The international community can no longer face Iran with just a defensive coalition. Iran has to be recognized for what it is, and designated as a greater problem than many seem inclined to admit. I believe diplomacy can solve many things.

Iran is entrenched throughout the Middle East, and uses its proxies, including the Houthis in Yemen, to sow destruction, death, and discord. They turn other nation-states, like Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, into an ungovernable mess. Why do deals with such devils? Why wait for their own people to rise up and stage a counterrevolution? The problem with reliance on such an ideal scenario is no one knows if, or when, that will happen.

There are limits to the West’s involvement. Do bigger powers really care about Iran on a granular level? Not really. Their leaders are conditioned to calculate whether they are prepared to pay the price for any given action. Some would find the cost of taming Tehran unacceptable.

Where is the sort of international coalition that ultimately involved seventy-four nations when President Obama sought to destroy Daesh/ISIS? Why can’t such global cooperation be extended to include Iran? Why, instead of condemning them, is there an instinct to appease? If those

questions are not answered, Israel has the right to act alone. It has no choice.

We have the practical assets, the military power, to do so. The distance between Israel and Iran is at once an advantage and a disadvantage. It means we are not vulnerable to a mass invasion, but also makes it harder, but possible, for us to make long aerial journeys to take out heavily defended installations, mainly their nuclear sites.

Iran is unlikely to change while current mechanisms of power remain in place, but my hope for the future in the Middle East lies with a new generation of leaders who are younger, technocratic, and instinctively more inclusive. They have already shown remarkable bravery, in plotting a path to peace.

It takes real leadership to even hint at the advantages of coexistence. These leaders are, first and foremost, Muslims. They are also mindful of geography. Mohammed bin Zaid Al Nahayan's presidency of the United Arab Emirates is commendably far-sighted, despite the inherent vulnerability of UAE being separated from Iran, at its closest point across the Strait of Hormuz, by only twenty-one nautical miles. The physical risk of invasion is considerable.

Similarly, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain must be mindful that the closest distance between his border and that of Iran is only 111 nautical miles. I have already identified Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia as a pivotal figure. In diplomatic terms, he has created a kind of mitigated reconciliation with the Iranians, overseen by the Chinese, without achieving any long-term conflict resolution.

As host to the holiest site in Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca, his kingdom has to sustain the closest of relationships with nearly two billion believers. They have an historic resistance to the state of Israel, but the world is aware of the fact that we speak to them, and that we fly over their air space from Israel to India, in Indian aircraft. Israeli businessmen can travel to Saudi Arabia for their commercial activities.

There are so many sensitivities to take into account. I would support any attempt to ease the attempts of Israeli Arabs to travel to the holy city, for Hajj or Umrah. A direct air route from Tel Aviv to Jeddah would remove the need to cross through Jordan by road, and into Oman, before taking a flight.

These are the sort of details that need to be clarified for the sake of future generations. Our neighbors are extremely exposed. I fear this issue,

and the associated problems in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, cannot be solved regionally. It has to be addressed internationally. The Americans, in particular, have the capability to do so.

I am concerned that there is a lack of international will to counteract what is a global problem. It is possible to deal with things that have the potential to disturb our future, and that of the region, without waging indiscriminate war on the Iranian people. Nuclear sites, used for military ends, remain a legitimate target.

I am no warmonger. I would prefer a peaceful solution, but, by taking away what we do not want the Iranians to have, the world would issue the regime a reminder of the prevailing balance of power. Similarly, we cannot deal with terrorist proxies, simply because they have the fiendish pull of our hostages. They have to be made aware that they can be crushed.

As noted at the start of this chapter, the leadership of Hamas and Hezbollah has been forcibly dismantled. The vacuum has been filled, up to a point, and while hostilities continue, the situation is inevitably fluid. Though there are some clues about the nature of enforced change, it is difficult to look too far into the future.

Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's latest leader, fled to Tehran from Lebanon, reportedly in a plane carrying Iran's foreign minister, after Nasrallah's death. In effect, he was the last man standing following the rapid removal of Hashem Safieddine, the heir apparent, in another airstrike. The quintessential company man, Qassem had been the organization's number two since 1991.

Nasrallah gave his speeches from tunnels and was rarely seen in public. He never attended funerals or initiated face-to-face contact with his fighters. Despite that, he was admired as a smart, charming, and effective leader. Qassem pledged to "continue our war plan" in his first televised speech at the end of October 2024, but he is not a natural military commander. It may be he is more of a paper tiger. That would be no bad thing.

Hamas also struggled with the implementation of a succession plan. The responsibility of selecting Sinwar's replacement was entrusted to a committee consisting of representatives from the Palestinian diaspora, Gaza, and the West Bank. The three main powerbrokers, Khalil al-Hayya and Zaher Jabarin in the two territories and Khaled Mashal in exile, had an existential crisis on their hands.

Haniyeh was their political guru. Sinwar embodied the fanaticism that underpins their military strategy. Their loss left Hamas rudderless, but the situation is too complex to talk about an absolute victory over them. It's not a starkly defined, black-and-white thing. My educated guess is that Hamas will exist after the war, but in a different, more low-key but overtly political form.

Our army now operates from a painfully acquired position of strength, and will ensure the terrorists will have minimal military capacity. We command the skies. Never again, I trust, will there be a lack of on-the-ground intelligence in Gaza and the West Bank. We must never forget that every rocket Hamas fired at the state of Israel is either based on transferred technology from Iran or made in Iran.

In any case, the region's supposed love for Hamas and Hezbollah is close to being nonexistent. Despite ritual incantations of support for the Palestinian cause, it has little traction among the hierarchy of the Middle East, who see the problem as a brake on economic progress and social stability.

The proxies are reviled for bringing trouble to their doorsteps. The private hope of many regional leaders, that Israel would get in there and get rid of them quickly, proved to be optimistic, but antipathy endures. The principles involved in any solution to the Palestinian problem, and the identification of individuals with the potential to truly influence a new era, are remarkably complex.

To be clear, the best option, in terms of security, is for Gaza to come under Israeli control, militarily and civilly. Any terrorist who lifts his head out of a tunnel can then be taken down. A second option involves an international agreement to penetrate if we see the need. A third involves a peacekeeping force, and strict supervision of financial aid, to prevent it getting into the wrong hands. A fourth features a renewed Palestinian Authority.

That would require stringent conditions. Total demilitarization of the Gaza Strip. A civil authority that is not based on Hamas ideology. Acceptance of the existence of the state of Israel, including unequivocal acknowledgment of it being a sovereign and democratic country. And, finally, the abandonment of terrorism.

Who could be empowered to ensure these conditions are met? Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, is eighty-nine. His

credibility is undermined by his historic resistance to negotiation. I have, in the past, questioned that directly: If you want to buy a car, you'll negotiate with the salesman. If you want a new house, you'll negotiate with the real-estate agent. Yet if you want to have a country, you will refuse to negotiate? What do you want, to get it gift wrapped with a red bow?

As far as a future Palestinian state is concerned, the Palestinians did not want to discuss a deal openly or physically with us. My frustration was rooted in a well-intentioned, meticulous but ultimately fruitless process started by John Kerry, President Obama's secretary of state. I was part of a four-man Israeli team that worked throughout a series of long nights due to our time difference with Washington, drawing up what became known as the framework for negotiations.

Kerry's plan was to outline what could be on the table, by setting the subjects, only, for further negotiations. This highlighted such issues as a border, the concept of Jerusalem, the welfare of refugees, sustained security, recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and more.

Talks went back and forth. We did a normal day's work in Israel, between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., before arguing over every sentence, each nuance of language, over our link to the US through our early hours. It was incredibly difficult, because sometimes the very act of countenancing talks over a particular problem weakens your stance. Ultimately, however, we produced a beautiful document, pregnant with possibility.

We were called to the White House by President Obama, and asked if we could proceed on the basis of the framework. We agreed, and remained in Washington over the next days when Abbas—or Abu Mazen, to give him his *kunya*—was asked the same question. He promised the president he would sleep on his decision. He still sleeps—and this, remember, was only to agree on the subjects for any future negotiation.

The fragmentation of the Palestinians is a huge obstacle in finding a figure they can rally around. Internal splits are so deep, and positions are so entrenched. The most popular projected leader, to judge from a recent poll of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, is Marwan Barghouti, an influential figure in the First and Second Intifadas.

Now in his sixties, he has spent the last two decades in an Israeli jail, serving five cumulative life sentences for the murder of four Israeli citizens. Supporters hail him as a man of the people, a fluent Hebrew speaker who rails against corruption. A prolonged high-profile campaign for his release

was joined by Hamas in February 2024, which, in an Israeli climate shaped by grief and sacrifice, provides a telling indication of the unacceptable nature of his candidacy to many.

Mohammed Dahlan was born in the Khan Yunis refugee camp and is independent of both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority because of his links to Fatah. Though he lacks personal popularity, being the choice of only 8 percent of those polled in the process that gave Barghouti a 39 percent approval rating, he has become a respected figure in exile in Abu Dhabi.

He has direct experience of the problems, having been head of Gaza's Preventative Security force before Hamas seized power. He helped in the negotiations for the Oslo Accords and is well connected across the region. I have come to know him as a perceptive observer. I value his analysis.

Hezbollah was allowed to amass an arsenal of 150,000 rockets between 2006 and 2023. Their medium-range missiles had the capacity to cover the state of Israel in its entirety. War has badly diminished their stocks, and the so-called Northern Arrows operation has resulted in the deaths of at least two thousand Hezbollah fighters.

They miscalculated our response, in clearing swaths of the south of the country they have chosen to infest, with full Iranian support. Their infrastructure has been severely diminished. Their ability to attack, from bunkers and firing positions close to the border, had been disrupted before the Israeli Defense Forces announced it had completed its military goals there on October 29, 2024.

It was not as if they were not warned. The international community, led by French president Emmanuel Macron and Amos Hochstein from the White House underlined the gravity of the situation when they visited Lebanon. Macron floated the notion of what he called "inclusive sovereignty" and Hochstein, conscious of the need to provide the Biden administration with a tangible legacy, sought to clarify the parameters of a long-term peace plan.

A rigorously controlled ceasefire suited the Israeli agenda. From our perspective, an agreement is essential if we are to allow the repopulation of the northern borders, for schools to reopen, and settlements to have sufficient security. That requires the admittedly unlikely leap of faith, of trusting in the viability of the "government with a purpose" that Macron demanded be formed as a matter of urgency.

Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces since 2017, ended a two-year hiatus when he was elected as president in January 2025, but despite Qatari promises to fund the army's wages and fuel supplies, the state remains factionally divided and prey to outside interests. To quote one influential Lebanese acquaintance, whom I met in New York recently, "the bottom line is there is no hope. They're fighting among themselves for something that doesn't exist."

In a wider context, however, it is clear that the psychological damage inflicted by the pager and walkie-talkie explosions, and the subsequent detonation of booby-trapped pagers that targeted Hezbollah officials before the intensification of Israel's air and land assault in Lebanon, was profound.

Western security services reportedly identified Israel as being responsible for the simultaneous explosion of pagers in Hezbollah strongholds in an operation one excitable social media poster described as "Yossi Cohen's masterpiece." I was directly involved in long-term preparations for that in my capacity as the Mossad director.

I can understand the world's fascination with the details of the operation. In the majority of cases the pagers beeped, indicating an incoming encrypted message that required two buttons to be pressed. This obliged the user to use both hands, which resulted in injuries to their faces, hands, and abdomens that left them unable to fight. The walkie-talkies had been operational since 2015; even before their detonation, they represented a significant breach in Hezbollah's internal security.

Cyberwarfare and technological infiltration have grown increasingly sophisticated in the twenty years since I first realized its potential, when I was head of special operations at the Mossad. Again, without breaking our code of confidentiality, or hinting at the identity of the perpetrators, I immediately understood the strategic significance of the Lebanon operation.

It had several complementary outcomes. The enemy's communications structure was disrupted, and the confidence of its operatives was shaken to the core. It delivered invaluable intrusive intelligence from behind enemy lines. It proved the potential of sophisticated special operations that can be directed at specific aspects of an enemy's activity. It was specifically targeted, and avoided mass civilian casualties.

Anyone capable of making such weaponized communications equipment has the ability to enter the enemy's processes unnoticed. It is possible to see what they are looking for; once the enemy's need has been

identified, it can be covertly catered to. It is possible then to supply equipment with all sorts of unpleasant surprises.

Intelligence would be delivered daily. It would reveal locations, priorities, the movement patterns of key officials. All that remained was to wait and decide the ideal time to strike. The shock created by the success of such a mission mentally degrades the enemy, especially when they thought they had taken every precaution.

Such operations take years to conceive and perfect. Once undertaken, they obviously have to be reinvented. The beauty of the concept lies in the way it plays on the enemy's mind. Deathly doubt has been sown. Infiltration of this scale is extremely hard to discover. They know it. We know it. Everyone knows it.

The offensive against Hezbollah was successful on several levels, most notably in the air and on the ground, where it was self-evidently an attack against terrorists, rather than Lebanese national forces or factions. It led to calls to weaken Iranian influence, and aided negotiations because, as Al Capone is reputed to have said, "You can go a long way with a smile. You can go a lot farther with a smile and a gun." I know the truth of that statement.

So, is peace possible, or are we doomed to live by the sword—or the gun, for that matter? No one can answer that with any certainty. I will say, though, that if you had suggested to Israelis immediately after the 1973 war that agreement with the Egyptians was possible, most of them would have questioned your sanity. Yet the Camp David Accords, five years later, led to the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, which remains the most significant conciliatory moment of my lifetime, so far.

Chapter 18

Cut Us and We Bleed

Twenty-five thousand forty men and women have fallen in defense of our country, of our people.

Each a whole world, who gave their life for a whole universe.

Each of them a hero. Each of them a guiding star, that lights our way.

We see their faces. We remember their names. We hold their memories dear.

Israel's fatalities in combat have mounted since I made that address, on the eve of Yom HaZikaron, our National Remembrance Day, which, in 2024, fell between sunset on May 12 and the evening of May 13. A single, empty chair on the stage at the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem stood sentinel, a symbol of yearning for the return of hostages languishing in Gaza.

It was a sombre evocation of collective loss and individual sacrifice, a reminder of the human cost of nationhood in a time of war. Families robbed of fathers, sons, mothers, daughters. Communities stripped of the best and brightest. A relatively small country, bereft and embattled. Cut us and we bleed. Rouse us and we respond.

In dwelling on those themes, as president of the Friends of the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization, I was fulfilling a sacred duty in paying homage to the fallen. It was a very public process that mirrored the more private, painful rituals of offering comfort to the bereaved.

As I spoke, I was, like the audience, distilling personal grief. The intimacy of that act encouraged a singular response. In my case, I summoned images of a series of photographs that, imagined in sequence, told the story of my family, and the trials of my country.

The first photograph, which I treasure, captures two boys with everything to live for. My cousin Miki and I are looking casually at each

other. We were good kids, religious. I was slightly older; he could not have been more than eight years old. Our world was beautiful. Our grins suggest we were sharing a childish joke. Miki's soft face and clear, warm eyes stand out. He was a sweet, sweet child.

Unlike me, he fulfilled family expectations and became a rabbi. He brought up ten children—Shlomo, Pedaya, Shira, Netanel, Yehoshua, Miriam, Orit, Tehilla, Rinat, and Esther—in the West Bank settlement of Otniel. He served as a paratrooper, a colonel in the IDF, and was cherished as the executive director of a local yeshiva, a religious school.

A big man with a luxuriant beard, his eyes never lost their sheen, though he wore glasses. He was loved, admired and respected by his fellow settlers. Though he had been touched by tragedy, since four students at his school had been murdered by terrorists in 2002, no one really expected him to be a target. He had a firm moral compass but was a benign influence.

Yet, on an early summer's afternoon in 2016, he died instantly when the family car he was driving along Mount Hebron's Route 60 came under fire from a Hamas terrorist gunman in an overtaking vehicle with Palestinian plates. Army investigators who searched the car, which flipped after veering off the road, found more than twenty bullet casings from a Kalashnikov rifle.

His wife, Chava, alongside him in the front seat, was critically injured, shot in the eye as she turned to check on two of her children in the backseat. Her daughter Tehilla, fourteen, was shot in the stomach, but recovered. Her son Pedaya, fifteen at the time, was traumatized but only lightly injured.

The gunman was killed in a standoff with IDF troops a month later. His principal collaborator was sentenced to two consecutive terms of life imprisonment. The cycle of violence, which in family terms stretched back many years, to the murder of their daughter-in-law's father by a previous generation of Hamas terrorists, remained unbroken.

It is too easy to revert to rage, to seek vengeance. Far better to sift through the wreckage of hopes and dreams to find scraps of humanity. In this case, hope arrived in the form of a Palestinian doctor, Ali abu Sharkh, who was first on the scene. He saved Chava's life by freeing her airways, which had been blocked by her seatbelt, removing her from the car and giving her emergency treatment on the roadside.

The next photograph in my mind's eye was taken at Miki's funeral, which was attended by an estimated four thousand people and overseen by

the chief rabbi of Israel. I had returned that morning from a mission to Moscow, and took special care of Pedaya, Miki's son.

I am cradling him in the image. He is wearing an olive tunic, a black-and-white hooped yarmulke, and has long black peyot, the side locks that proclaim his Orthodox faith. His body sags into mine. His head is turned and his eyes are closed as he is kissed by his siblings.

My eulogy to his father, my cousin, is echoing around my brain: "I swear in the name of the Israeli defense establishment to keep the state of Israel, which you loved so much, united within and protected from without. Farewell, my dearest Miki. You were a man of peace, and I loved you with all my soul."

There were so many scenes of grief that day, when Chava was still fighting for life. In another photograph, Shlomo, Miki's eldest son, is hugging Pedaya and his sister Tehilla, who, though wheelchair bound, was released from the hospital to attend. Shlomo was suddenly the man of the house; he was serving at that time as a captain, a platoon commander, and resigned from the army to take care of his wounded family.

Shlomo left his brigade to join the Mossad, where he excelled in the Security Department. He was only twenty-nine when he was killed in a motorcycle accident, on the way to work, three years later. Doctors fought for two days to save him, but he succumbed to his injuries, leaving his wife, Yiska, who also lost her father, Eliyahu Ben-Ami, in a terror attack, and their three children.

The blow was almost too much to bear, but the tightness of family bonds developed an inner strength. Pedaya matured into a fine young man, principled and determined. He was deeply affected by his father's death and by Shlomi's army service, but as he explained in an interview in June 2022, "I realized that I would either let life pass me by or I would live it, and I chose to live. I started getting back on track."

He saw service in the IDF as a calling, and joined Shlomo's old combat unit, the Gavati Brigade, after his mother reluctantly signed a waiver, excluding him from exemption from military duty. The last photograph of him, taken minutes before his death in northern Gaza, was of him smiling at a local child. His last message to his family was: "I am guarding you and my heart is strong for you."

He was twenty-two, a platoon commander in the Tsabar Battalion, when he fell, with ten of his men, on October 31, 2024. He was buried the

following day, on a hillside in the military section of Har HaMenuchot cemetery in Jerusalem. Another photograph, taken of me on that day, is haunting. In it I am gray-faced, vacant, careworn. I looked on the edge and felt dead inside.

The distress around me was summed up by Orit, Pedaya's sister: "It's inexplicable pain. We couldn't believe that this happened to us again. I don't have my father and he won't come back. I don't have my eldest brother and he won't come back. And I don't have my younger brother and he won't come back."

Just two days earlier, Pedaya's cousin, Elchanan Kalmanson, had been laid to rest. He had died heroically on the morning of October 8, driving one hundred kilometers to the border under heavy rocket fire to defend Kibbutz Be'eri, site of a massacre by Hamas terrorists in the early hours of the conflict. Together with his brother Menachem and nephew Itiel, who survived, he saved the lives of more than a hundred residents in a fourteen-hour rescue operation, staged from house to house.

He could have saved himself while evacuating families, who had been cowering in safe rooms as their houses burned around them. He crammed ten to twelve people in a truck designed for four but always returned to help others. He was eventually gunned down by a terrorist, hiding in a darkened room, and died in his brother's arms.

His sacrifice tells us something profound about the unifying nature of the ideal of statehood he held dear. He rushed to help on his own initiative from a religious Zionist community, and fell protecting a secular kibbutz. The people he saved were poles apart from him, politically and culturally, yet such differences were ultimately irrelevant. Jew was prepared to lay down his life for fellow Jew.

That thought was uppermost in my mind during my address to the bereaved:

Tonight, especially, we hear the voices of the brave soldiers who went into battle.
We read the loving messages of our brave sons and daughters
As they rushed to the front line to protect and defend our people.
A generation of lions and lionesses who showed, and continue to show
That they carry on their shoulders the mantle of historic defenders of Israel.
I think tonight of my dear cousins, two kind and brave young men.
One family, which embodies the sacrifice we pay.
One family to which we all belong.

It is often said that Israel was formed by dissension. We may be close ideologically, but we are apart politically. In recent years, especially during the mass pro-democracy protests that paralyzed Tel Aviv on Saturday nights in 2023, it has resembled a nation set against itself. I'm not against demonstrations—my son and his wife and friends and many of my close friends joined in—provided the protesters don't turn against their country.

By all means, argue against the status quo, speak up for what you believe is right. But don't stop working. Continue volunteering. Do what you have to do for your nation. Be grateful for the selflessness of others. Perhaps then you will understand why I am so proud that, in addition to featuring IDF insignia, Elchanan's headstone bears the mark of the Mossad. His service might have been secretive, but his character is there for all to see. He was a patriot, and his memory is a blessing. The Elchanan team, including his brother and nephew, received the Israel Prize for their bravery.

When we think of the way the Jewish psyche is shaped by constant sacrifice, we naturally revert to the timeless tragedy of the Holocaust. But death has been omnipresent since Roman times; our lives have invariably depended on someone else's goodwill. My family history, in which my father served in the army, my grandparents fought Arabs and served the resistance, is typical because everyone was determined the nation would survive.

I was born in 1961, when Jerusalem was still divided. Our house and shelter was bombed by the Jordanians in the 1967 war. We felt the war. In 1973, the streets of the city were littered with dead soldiers. There were lists of the fallen, on rolling scrolls, on television every night. My parents attended funerals every second day. While we were at home my father was at the Egyptian front in Sinai. The country was bleeding dramatically.

I was too young to go to the funerals, but I felt the grief, sensed the sorrow. We lived in the shadow of disaster. We knew the dead. Some were pupils of my mother, a teacher. My father served, fighting all the way down to Egypt. That's why I did not hesitate, when I was asked to join the orphans and widows organization. I just didn't know how personal it would become.

Civilian casualties, especially in the number sustained during the current conflict, are a disaster. Each represents the failure of a basic act of faith, that the innocent would be protected in times of peril. The most basic duty of any government is to make sure the people are safe in their houses.

It's different for a soldier, who must accept an existential fact, that death comes with their territory. We have to serve and, if fate decrees, we must be sacrificed.

No one forced me to join the army in 1979. I could have claimed I was seeing pink witches in my dreams, or some such fantasy, and argued I was unfit for active duty, but instead I volunteered for an operational platoon. I wanted to fight because I believed in the cause, and did so knowing full well I could easily be killed.

I have lost friends and family members in battle. It's tragic, but this is what soldiers and their officers are made for. As Mossad operatives, we prepared meticulously for our missions, but rationalized sacrificing our lives to protect a cherished way of life. I am not saying the lives of those colleagues are worth less than those who spent their days sipping espressos in Tel Aviv and working in high-rise offices, but this is our job.

I can weep. I can grieve. I can hug the bereaved. I can feel broken by pity and regret. Of course, death affects me. But who will guard the nation if not us? When you have a national crisis, what do we do? Break apart? Bemoan the fact that life has screwed us? Give up? No. We fight. We strive. We endure. We believe. This is the only life we have.

I hope I am not being too presumptuous in suggesting I have always been driven by a sense of duty. It is the strand that has linked my life, through military service, working undercover, progressing to the highest echelons of the intelligence community, or operating as national security adviser.

That was a rite of passage, in terms of being introduced to political pragmatism, but I pride myself on having always been sure-footed. I know many feel my natural progression is into politics. Its pitfalls are obvious, because it is open season on anyone with the impertinence to have ambitions in this area. To use a blunt Israeli phrase, critics and opponents eat your liver. The job's principal attraction lies in the opportunity to get things done.

I am happy with my life, post-Mossad, but we have an imminent and continuous argument at home, where I have educated my kids to debate things of personal importance forcefully, but with appropriate respect. It's a typical Jewish household; with four children and my wife there are six of us, with about eighteen different opinions.

My wife studies the media and asks me to promise never to go into politics, because strangers will crash into our lives. Yet three hours later, after further reflection, she bemoans the country's lack of leadership, and insists I have no choice but to throw my hat into the ring. She tells me I have to do so for the sake of the state of Israel. It may be a bungee jump without the rope, but it is my destiny.

I have had many people implore me to run for office over the past couple of years. Some, such as the university professor from the notably mixed city of Haifa who assured me that I would receive the support of his students, Arabs who believed I would promote their integration into Israeli society as a reforming prime minister, came as a pleasant surprise.

Others, such as the Israeli singer I met on a flight, were strikingly passionate. "The situation is terrible," she reasoned. "We want you to be our PM, if there is a chance. We want you to roll your sleeves up and get back to work. Make this country better. None of us have any thought of going anywhere else. Rebuild this country for us."

I've also been approached by those in the political sphere. Another lady, a former minister in the Israeli government who was not a natural ally, pleaded with me to run. Another faction came to my office and proposed that I lead them. Two powerbrokers from different sides of the political spectrum, whom I met both in Tel Aviv and London, were more representative of what the Brits call the Westminster bubble.

Evidently one of the few things that Dom Cummings, controversial Conservative Party adviser, and Lord Peter Mandelson, the UK's new ambassador to the United States, agree upon is my suitability to lead my country. It was a distinctive experience, which felt like a polite form of vetting.

Mandelson in particular was not backward in coming forward. He arrived at a lunch for ten in Tel Aviv, armed with a sheaf of papers connected to my career and quizzed me throughout the meal. I suppose I should be flattered that he and Dom felt I had the requisite energy, determination, and intellectual capacity to be PM.

The reality, though, is that the office offers precious little protection.

Good people do not need the certainty of personal vilification. They ask why they should disrupt a well-ordered life and place their family in the firing line. As someone once said, double-click on anyone's life and you will find something. If you don't get the dirt, you are not digging deep

enough. In today's world, the merest trace of dirt is enough to bring you down from the highest office.

There is an understandable cynicism about a politician's sense of purpose. I am told that I am regarded as an exception to the rule, that most members of the Knesset are more interested in the fringe benefits than the nuts and bolts of public service. I don't need a car and a driver to justify a misplaced sense of self-importance.

It is probably just as well that I am used to making instinctive judgments about an individual's motivation, since the nuances of influence can take some getting used to. The prospect of power, however distant, means you acquire a range of new friends.

I once fell into conversation about my future with a leading figure from one of the biggest media companies. He made it clear he was prepared to offer practical and proactive support to my candidacy, if I chose to put myself forward. "Let us call you," he said. "Don't initiate anything. We will send out the message, 'come, lead us.' That's the strong way to do this. It will be as if we are calling you to service."

This might sound a little far-fetched, but when mulling over my options, I drew from the wisdom of one of my favorite philosophers, the Greek Stoic Epictetus, whose most celebrated observation was that "no man is free who is not master of himself." I also drew a parallel between modern politics and his observations on the ancient Olympic Games:

> First mark the conditions and the consequences. You will have to put yourself under discipline; to eat by rule, to avoid cakes and sweetmeats; to take exercise at the appointed hour whether you like it or not, in cold and heat; to abstain from cold drinks and wine at your will. Then, in the conflict itself you are likely enough to dislocate your wrist or twist your ankle, to swallow a great deal of dust, to be severely thrashed, and after all of these things, to be defeated.

In other words, you must abandon everything to which you have become accustomed, and accept you still have no guarantee of success. I'm comfortable with that. I'm relaxed about the prospect of entering a competition I might not win. I have always accepted risk, and I regard humility as an essential element of leadership.

The buck may stop with a prime minister, but no one is infallible. I would want those around me to challenge my views, interrogate my arguments, before I take a final decision. That worked well operationally in the Mossad, where we prepared for missions with two separate units. The blue team had the responsibility of organizing and carrying out the task.

The red team critiqued their plans, attacked any assumptions and sought to pick holes in their situational analysis.

This was big-boy stuff. It wasn't about arguing for arguing's sake. I was comfortable with big calls but wanted people to look deeply into my actions and principles. I wanted them to reach their own conclusions about whether I was right or wrong. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, provided it can be backed up convincingly, and everyone appreciates that it is only one person's view.

Why should that be any different in politics? I can't say I cherish disagreement, but can you imagine the implications of having a one-sided parliament in which there was no dissent, and a slavish devotion to the leader? That's a dictatorship, impure and simple.

The quality of the team around a leader should be paramount. Unfortunately, in Israeli politics, the opposition is fragmented by a combination of individual entitlement and a lack of rigor. I was disappointed by the conversations I had about potential partnerships in a new right-wing bloc with former PM Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman, the former foreign and defense minister.

On a personal level, I got along well with Bennett, who announced he was leaving politics following the collapse of his coalition government in 2022, but I got little sense of his political identity, beyond his vehement, long-standing opposition to a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem. When I asked him to outline his preparations for a return to the political arena, he merely mentioned that he had employed a teenager to rebut criticism on social media.

I sensed both men were not serious about upsetting the status quo. Even accounting for Bennett's spell as PM, I'm sad to say they had less experience and expertise than me in such key areas as international relations and national security. I had little confidence that they would consolidate power, if it was possible. Bibi Netanyahu, by contrast, is a super mitigator. He wants to be PM, and will sit down with anyone to remain in power.

Bennett was surprised by my announcement that I would instead be extending my contract with SoftBank for two more years, sending me a message asking me to reconsider, but ultimately both he and Lieberman expected me to be the junior partner in their arrangement. With appropriate respect, I am no one's number three.

I saw or heard nothing from them that would have offered the nation much-needed hope. They lacked the necessary determination and inclusivity. Bibi's reliance on the more extreme members of his coalition is potentially divisive, but his government is strong. I fully expect him to be locked into position until an election, most likely in October 2026.

I still have a desire to make a political contribution, but I have much to learn and much to consider. It might be that, one day, when the time is right, I will ultimately form my own party. Over time, I hope, people will be able to make a considered judgment on my capabilities. It is my job to communicate the reality of my views, rather than the perception of them.

I am not a fair-weather friend. Anyone can excel when the sun is shining and the birds are singing, but I am conditioned to operate in uncomfortable circumstances. By all means negotiate for peace, but remain alert for the lions lurking behind the bushes, ready to pounce. I know that, where the security of the state is at stake, you have to be very firm in dealing with your enemies.

I believe in my country. I believe in our people. I spoke from the heart throughout that address on National Remembrance Day, and hope my message was heard beyond our borders:

As one who has dedicated my life to the security of our people,
I assure you all Israel remains strong.
The foundations of our home remain unbreakable.
Today we must grieve together, but we must also rebuild together.
We must be sure to safeguard our unity.
It is our greatest strength and strategic asset.
We must preserve and defend it, as we defend our very lives.
We must refrain from baseless hatred. Simply put, united we stand.

Conclusion

My Israel

Modern Israel is a young country, with a youthful demographic. So how will the third generation of citizens, my kids, shape the nation? Are we entering an era of societal change? It may not be a comfortable process, but I believe it will be positive. We have to accept our factional differences and concentrate on what binds us.

Huge variances in opinions and outlooks are tangible. Here you are colored by the way you look, the way you dress: by the peyot, the yarmulke, and the black suit. They offer immediate clues to your political stance, your personal heritage. It's not like the UK or the US, where you don't know, by sight, whether someone is with or against your opinion. It's unique, but it doesn't ultimately have to be of great importance. It is not the way you look, but who you are, and how you behave, that matters.

Historically, the Ultra-Orthodox diaspora emphasized their differences because they wanted to guard Judaism, and they were right to do so. They cherished their beliefs and behaviors, but integrated, up to a point, with the secular communities around them, especially in Europe and the USA. But when they migrated to Israel, following the Holocaust, they had little commitment to the concept of the state.

They were fine with it, but didn't want to participate in the collective effort required to build it. There was no sense of nationhood. This created a problem even before the country was ratified, when David Ben-Gurion recognized the dangers of a delegation from the United Nations taking soundings among the people before the vote on the partition plan.

Ben-Gurion followed his favorite maxim that "I compromise and compromise until I get what I want." He convinced the leaders of the Orthodox community to fall into line by promising institutionalized

religious education and removing any obligation to serve, militarily. They were given scope to be lightly involved in society.

Speaking as someone who has served the state for forty-two years, and worked for seven prime ministers, some of whom I liked and others I did not, I say this has to change. There is a communal responsibility to contribute in some shape or form. If participation is not achieved willingly, it can be ensured legislatively.

I would not give the Orthodox community the right to opt out of military service, but other services could be provided instead. They would be expected to agree to work for the state as directed in other areas, such as hospitals, schools, factories, health and social services, military factories and other industries. Refuse to do so, and you forfeit your right to social support. The country will not pay you for not doing anything for our beloved and threatened Israel.

The fundamental principle that every Israeli citizen has to serve the nation, be they an Arab, Jew, Bedouin, or Christian, must be enforced and enshrined in law. I appreciate that, to some, this is a revolutionary idea. There will be protests. This is not about volunteering. It is about following orders, for the common good.

Like the Orthodox community, Israeli Arabs have a decision to make. Where are they politically and socially? If they prefer to build a future in Israel, I would do all I can to ease their integration, provided they reciprocate. In that context, I have the greatest respect and admiration for the Druze people of Israel. They play a valuable role in our military and our security services, and contribute richly to all aspects of Israeli social life,

Tensions will be inevitable, because they are part of the nation's DNA. Just as many Jews came from Europe, with Western sensibilities, others came from North Africa or Arab nations like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. They had different values, a different language, a different accent. These have to be blended constructively into a wider framework. We need a form of social contract. You can't receive without giving. You pay taxes, you will receive social security if required.

Leadership is not for the faint of heart, or the fuzzy thinker. You can't try to be something you are not. Until a different decision is taken, Israel has to fully protect and support all Israelis living in the West Bank, as they would in other parts of the country. To be clear, I would crack down on

extremist settlers attacking their Palestinian neighbors. The state of Israel must be seen to be clean.

My vision involves inviting people from different angles of society, rightist and leftist, and those of different faiths and cultures, to discuss our future with open minds and hearts. Do you want to destroy or are you ready to build? Do you want to help, do you want to carry the burden? Do you want to cherish, or do you want to condemn? Do you care about your fellow citizens?

A leader has ultimate influence, but those views, on things like social policy, health, defense, and the economy, would feed into the future. Once formed, the plan must be transmitted effectively to the country. That's why I took it upon myself to explain the war to the nation. I gave interviews to all outlets, to radio channels that I had not previously known existed.

I spoke to the station that proclaimed itself as the voice of the North. I talked to the so-called children of the South. I directly addressed the Ultra-Orthodox community. Someone must have been listening, because after a couple of months I received a call from a government spokesman, who said I was the only one explaining the issues, events, and intricacies of the conflict. I asked to be briefed, within the conventions of confidentiality, and though he promised to get back to me, he never did so.

Similarly, a major media owner lobbied for my appointment as the modern equivalent of Chaim Herzog, who was celebrated as "the national soother" because of his daily broadcasts during the Six-Day War of 1967, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. A passionate defender of the Zionist cause, he eventually became president, an office currently held by his son, Isaac.

I am my own man. I realize that I can't be defined on the current locus. People ask me, "Who are you, an Ashkenazi Jew, like so many who coalesce around power? You look Moroccan or Tunisian, but aren't you of Polish origin? Are you religious or secular?" That vagueness is an advantage, because it avoids my being pigeonholed politically, and hopefully gives me a better chance of being listened to without prejudice.

I was born a rightist, and probably will die one. My father raised me to be a super-liberal democrat and a Zionist. In many ways I am a social democrat, a leftist in my social thoughts. I believe in LGBTQ+ rights. I support mixed marriages and single-sex marriages. I believe in equality, and a system that enshrines human rights.

I am more socialist than extremist, but, as far as the security of the state of Israel is concerned, I believe in Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall." I will strive for peace but fight my enemies like hell. I will protect Israel and Judaism, and keep the holy sites for ourselves. I will not, under any circumstances, allow us to become a foreign-dominated country. Jews will never again be a landless people, as we were for two thousand years until 1948.

Many modern politicians lack intellectual curiosity, and have little grasp of contrasting philosophies. I appreciate this begs a searching, highly personal question. What type of PM would I be, if, despite my current reticence, that is to be my fate? I feel, with due humility, that I need no more national or international experience. I have good language skills. I have strategic acumen and a proven ability to relate to, and communicate with, leaders on the world stage.

In our system, it is easy to win an election and lose, because of an inability or an unwillingness to form a workable coalition. Some leaders lack the instincts and capacity to mediate with rivals. Others don't care, so long as they get to wear the crown. They'll sit down with anyone to ensure the motorcades, the state visits, the cabinet platform, and the responsibility for big decisions. Ariel Sharon, an arch pragmatist, who, despite the criticism of colleagues who felt he was offering too much to prospective coalition partners, reasoned that he would sign a blank piece of paper if it enabled him to become PM. Once in office, he could make his mark.

I believe in seeking compromise, but not at any cost. I have one of the widest CVs in Israel. I am currently working in commerce, for a globally focused company. I know most of what you need to be a productive politician, and I also have faith in my fellow citizens, which makes me a little different to the norm. I would take particular care in creating an environment in which we could work together, as Israelis.

There are limits because of societal diversity, but everyone has to feel valued. We have a high birth rate, and have to give those kids more teachers and doctors so they can thrive. We have to have a better transportation system, so that, in what will hopefully be a peaceful postwar nation, those in the southern and northern outposts do not feel abandoned. They must be given better amenities to reduce the temptation to migrate toward Tel Aviv.

We are a resilient, resourceful people. It is amazing to think that, as recently as 2009, we were concerned that the country would dry up. I can still remember the campaign posters, featuring a once-beautiful young

woman, with a cracked, parched face. Now we are pioneers in desalination. We produce water for other nations, as well as our own. We have thriving hi-tech industries with a smart, young workforce.

How, then, do you engineer political and social realignment? I spoke to Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, at length about how he moved his Labour Party from the left of the political spectrum toward the center, over a decade that spanned three terms of office. He saw potential parallels with me using the existing powerbase of the dominant Israeli party, the Likud. He created New Labour, and envisaged me establishing New Likud.

That will not magically produce a feelgood factor, since people need to see the benefits of lofty ideals, fine words, and sensible policies. There's no guarantee that will be the outcome. The British economy grew stronger under Blair, but despite such advances as a reduction in child poverty, economic inequality grew. Though there was general satisfaction with living standards when he stepped down, a majority expressed pessimism for the future.

That echoes down the years, to the current day. The uncertainties and superficialities that undermine modern life mean many people are fearful and frustrated. When they pause, before making their vote in an election booth, the average individual in the US, UK, or Israel has a jaundiced view about the politicians asking for their trust.

It is a fact of political life that the moment you walk through the door of the White House, Downing Street, or our own PM's office in Jerusalem, there will be people trying to get you out. There is a constant fight for breathing room, a relentless attack on your credibility. It's a national game. I accept that for everyone who collared me at a social function recently and said, "Yossi, you have to save us," there will be another waiting for the smallest excuse to bash me.

I am not a defeatist by nature. I refuse to believe it is impossible to capture hearts and minds. I would seek to oversee an open discussion, and make it clear that I value well-intentioned advice. I would call the smartest, most influential figures in Israel together to try to establish some form of philosophical coalition. I'm not naïve enough to believe that everything in the garden will be wonderful, but I'm optimistic enough to believe fresh flowers will grow.

I have faith in the untapped energy of youth. In the Mossad, we made a point of taking our less-experienced operatives into meetings with the PM when we sought clearance for particularly sensitive missions. It was a two-way process: I wanted the PM to see and feel the quality and quiet fervor of the people who managed risks, or put their own lives in danger. In return, I wanted them to understand the gravity of decision making, and to know they had the approval of the man with his hand on the levers of power.

They also knew I had their backs. I owned failure, and made sure the right people were given credit for the successes. I had to have broad shoulders, because I carried total responsibility for my operatives' safety and welfare. Given any degree of political authority, I would feel the same responsibility for the nation's safety and welfare.

The Middle East needs the sort of fundamental change that can only be generated through transformational leadership, but generally speaking, the medium-term future is more hopeful. If we take 2050 as a milestone, I'd be confident that a consensus could emerge that balances emerging and existing power blocks.

As long as things move in a positive direction, the application of that power, and the nations wielding it, is of secondary importance. There is a fluidity to influence; empires wax and wane, rise and disappear. To take a random cross-section of colonizers, the Brits, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the Spanish all had their day.

In short, I'm not expecting World War III. Let's face it, we all have a vested interest in greater cooperation, since we share a small, vulnerable planet. Nations will eventually understand that water, energy, and food have to be produced and consumed with greater care and attention than it is today.

My fear, because of the danger of the depletion of rivers and lakes in a world that is getting hotter, is that sustained, unrestricted consumption in Europe and the United States will lead to a major shortage of food or fresh water. In Israel, we are relatively small partners in a global effort to arrest climate change, but we have an obligation to share the technologies that led to our success, in desalination.

If we take India as an example, it serves as both a warning and an opportunity. Temperatures of up to 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) pose an existential threat, but the sheer size of the country means that, given the capacity to produce fresh water through international

cooperation, it could be used to grow grains or fruit for the global marketplace.

This is a concept almost beyond individual nations. We need to create the environmental equivalent of the World Health Organization, which works to expand universal health coverage, contain disease outbreaks, and helps countries predict and respond to natural disasters. It oversees risk management on a massive scale.

Human migration is already a pivotal and pressing problem. People will always flee from war, poverty, and autocracy, but in broader terms, there needs to be an international effort to assist vulnerable countries, in Africa and Latin America in particular. This means external investment in infrastructure, industrial capacity, food production, education, and security.

Half the world doesn't care about climate change, or pays lip service to its significance without following through on stage-managed promises. There is a disconnect between vision and action that results in leaders arriving for global conferences in a fleet of private jets, saying the right things and doing precisely nothing. We can't give up, or give them an easy ride, because this is everyone's problem.

To shamelessly and slightly misquote John Lennon, you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm surely not the only one. Some states have impressive social and political vision. They are taking the threat seriously, and appreciate they are engaged in a long, arduous development process.

We've been trained for the last 120 years or so to use oil, gasoline, and other hydrocarbons, such as benzene. We've turned a blind eye to the consequences of reliance on fossil fuels. Our challenge is to adopt and trust a different mindset, one that stresses the importance of clean, renewable energies. It's a big task, but the implications of complacency or failure are frightening to contemplate.

In Israel, we see hydrogen as a clean alternative to methane, natural gas, which, when burned produces carbon dioxide. Scientists calculate it forms 75 percent of the mass of the universe, since hydrogen atoms are contained in humans, animals, plants, and, of course, water. It can be produced by nuclear power and renewable forms of energy, like wind and solar power.

Hydrogen-powered vehicles would improve air quality, but can hydrogen be produced on a large enough scale to fuel homes and businesses? My wife is one of many drivers to move to the use of a 100

percent electrical car, but can green electricity be incorporated into a national or international energy infrastructure?

These are the sort of questions an emerging generation will have to answer. It is their world to shape, and there are encouraging signs that they appreciate that they can no longer rely on conventional certainties. They have a head start in working together, since social media, for all its drawbacks, institutionalizes social connectivity.

This is where, inevitably, it gets personal. My family is central to my life. I have four wonderful children and six captivating grandchildren. I cherish each of them, for their differences as much as for their shared traits. How can I give them the best inheritance, in philosophical and moral terms, rather than financially?

I married extremely young, being a month away from my twentieth birthday. In the subsequent forty-five years, my wife and I have experienced life's typical ups and downs, while remaining true to our values and beliefs. Our aim has always been to make sure our family is tuned into reality. They have been encouraged to appreciate that they will go through tough times, as we did.

All my four children are a source of great pride. They embody the reasons that I have faith in my country's future. They are good people in their own right: successful in their own fields, intelligent, compassionate, and driven. One of the joys of getting older is seeing how parenthood helps to define them.

The main message I would wish to deliver to their kids, my grandchildren, concerns the importance of the family, and the nation. They are indivisible. Each needs to be protected and nurtured, to ensure they remain strong. Their values are interconnected, since each needs to be united. You have a calling to serve the country, look after its interests.

I want my grandchildren to possess the right human instincts and be mindful of the need to be good to one another. It is important to think of others, to be generous in spirit. Don't be selfish. Look around and see who needs you. Some will lack the basics, the right food in their stomachs or a reliable roof over their heads. Lend a hand, be a friend. Never underestimate the value of a hug, or a consoling or encouraging word.

I've no time for unproductive or inaccurate nostalgia. I'm not one of those who says the world was a better place when I was growing up. It was worse, uncertain and occasionally uncomfortable. I want my descendants to

live in an open-minded society, in which they are accepted for who they are, and what they are doing.

I don't care how they earn their living. They can be a dancer or a dustman, a baker or a banker, even a spy or an author, just as long as they are happy. I wish for them a world of greater equality and justice, within Israel and beyond our borders. I pray hatred will be diluted, and our natural benefits as a nation will be maximized. I still feel Israel is a great place to live; we have to strive to keep it that way, because we don't have the option of another homeland.

One of the biggest lessons of my life, which I have sought to pass on, involves the fundamental importance of personal determination. I love the observation famously attributed to former US president Calvin Coolidge in 1894: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Strive to be the best you can be. Don't allow your ambitions to slip away. Reach those personal targets in the correct manner, without compromising your family, your neighbor, or any fellow human being, for that matter. No one should be expected to pay the price for your fulfilment. By being good to them, you are being good to yourself.

Look at life through their eyes. Understanding others, realizing that not all human capacities are the same, clarifies your personal picture. You do not need anyone's permission to do what you feel, deep down, needs to be done. Do it. Own it. Deal with it, should things not work out as planned. It can be energizing and educational. The differences in most people's vision and their action are very wide. This gives us decision makers a natural advantage, because we know how to get things done. Others do not.

If you ask my kids to come up with one of my favorite sayings, they will probably mention my insistence that determination and deed go hand in hand. That message is delivered, regularly, in what I hope is the right spirit. It's a suggestion, a reminder rather than an order that must be followed to the letter. I recognize the world has changed since my parents tried to conduct our lives.

It was a different era. They meant well, but would dictate stances and standards. We had to be religious. We had to go to university. We had to do

this, we had to do that. It was too prescriptive. I have my nonnegotiables, like a deep dislike of dishonesty, but I tell my kids to do nothing because of me. I offer strands of advice, but ultimately, they must choose which path to take.

Allow no one to tell you that their life is better, because you are not doing what they did. Have the confidence to be yourself. Chase your dream. Do what you love. We instinctively search for happiness. It can be elusive, because if you are content in the morning there's no guarantee you will feel the same way when you go to bed. Life sometimes gets in the way.

It's only when you are unhappy that you realize how vital it is to be happy. I look across at drivers trapped in traffic jams at 6:00 a.m. and put myself behind the wheel of their cars. Sir or madam, are you happy? Are you feeling good about your position, personally and professionally? Do you have a choice? But let's look on the bright side. You have a job, which you will eventually reach when the traffic permits. You are not starving. Others are considerably worse off.

Two of the most toxic words in the English language are "if only." It forms the lament of too many people, who look back at their lives with regret. We've all come across them, bemoaning the fact that "if only I'd done this, or said that, things would have turned out for the better."

I can look back and say, with great sincerity, that one of my greatest privileges is that I did what I loved, excelled at what I cared about. How many of us can say that? That's why, at a recent family dinner on the Sabbath, I started a debate around the table about the futility of wasting the only life we have.

At the risk of sounding like a simpering social influencer, I have faith in the concept of world peace. Someone once told me that everything takes time, and time takes everything. A nice notion, isn't it? Treaties are not created overnight. Time can ease pain, but can it take away hate? Will long-standing enemies continue to have a Kalashnikov in their heart?

It's a two-way process. If I give of myself, you must give of yourself. Beliefs are a basic human freedom, to be encouraged so long as those of others are tolerated. People can pray to whatever deity they wish. My most profound wish is that my grandchildren grow up with a belief in Judaism and a commitment to the democratic and liberal state of Israel.

My country means everything to me. That's why it is fitting that I leave the last words in this book to David Ben-Gurion, our founding father:

“Israel was not created in order to disappear; Israel will endure and flourish. It is the child of hope and the home of the brave. It can neither be broken by adversity nor demoralized by success. It carries the shield of democracy and it honors the sword of freedom.”

Afterword

Completion of the Circle

History chooses its moments. On the evening of Thursday, June 12, 2025, Eastern Standard Time, I was the keynote speaker at a private dinner in New York for twenty or so staunchly supportive families. Inevitably, discussion was dominated by the future of the state of Israel and the existential need to defend it at all costs.

Iran loomed large, just as it did in around 60 or 70 percent of my work, over three decades, for the Mossad. Everyone in the room seemed convinced that an attack was inevitable. I knew it was imminent. I was not involved in the decision-making process but had received advance warning of our intent.

I could feel in my bones that Friday, June 13, would be a day to remember. At that moment, several time zones away, brave Israeli Air Force pilots, supported by Mossad operatives within Iran, were embarking on an operation to "degrade, destroy, and remove [the] threat" of Iran weaponizing its nuclear program.

We had reached a super-important and sensitive moment. To share a trade secret, this book was just about to go to press. I understood it would be incomplete without this afterword, and I promised immediately to be as candid as possible, within the restraints of our internal security process.

I had prepared for such an attack for many years, having started sending targeted equipment into Iran, as part of my role heading up the special-ops division of the Mossad two decades earlier. Intrusive intelligence operations within Iran were consistent and driven by the need to be ready when the time came to take dramatic and decisive action.

As with all sensitive intelligence missions, I needed to know where key individuals were, how they were working, who they were working with,

and what they were planning. We mapped the movements of military leaders and senior scientists, who were precariously living the lies of their nuclear program.

GPS and listening devices ensured they were unwittingly speaking to us. We gathered intelligence on their long-range missile capabilities with the intention of neutralizing them as quickly as possible. For the avoidance of doubt, we had more surprises up our sleeves, if required. Just ask Hezbollah.

Our air force, freed from the restrictions of what we term "standoff" operations, quickly established supremacy of the skies. They were able to fly, largely unchallenged, above key targets and hit the most important sites. The decimation of Iran's political, military, and scientific elite was swift. There was continuity to our self-defensive efforts across Israel's political, military, and intelligence communities.

Retaliation was inevitable. Tellingly, it was directed mainly at civilians. Most of my family in Israel spent their time in shelters. I was unable to travel back from the United States until the airspace cleared, but passed on warnings that our family home would be targeted. Our apartment in Tel Aviv was hit.

The world acted cynically, but we are used to that. The state of Israel is accustomed to standing alone. When we helped the world to fight Daesh, we received nothing in return. This time, despite the damning global implications of a rogue regime posing a nuclear threat, there was not even verbal support for our actions. Even Sir Winston Churchill, isolated in 1940, received greater assistance.

The exception was provided by President Donald Trump, a firm and farsighted leader. The mullahs underestimated his resolve in thinking they could get away with their usual tactical deflection and disinformation. By choosing to ignore the president's sixty-day deadline for meaningful negotiation, they made a fundamental mistake.

I have no idea whether my advice reached the president, but I urged senior members of the US administration to attack Iran first, with the intention of driving them to the negotiating table. It was foolish, in the extreme, to overlook the president's threat that if they did not do so, "I will attack, and Israel will lead that attack."

There could be no clearer indication of the wider impact of his words than the traffic jams caused by those who heeded President Trump's

warning to leave Tehran. Iranians, whether for or against the regime, were united by an urge for self-preservation.

Even the International Atomic Energy Agency finally took action by formally declaring that Iran was in breach of its non-proliferation obligations. Though the IAEA board hoped for "a diplomatic solution," such overt disapproval, for the first time in twenty years, was hugely significant.

The IAEA based its decision on the original copy of the archive. This revealed, for the world to see, the Iranians' previous plan for a bomb and their subterfuge in hiding sites, together with other undeclared nuclear activity.

From a personal point of view, the completion of the circle was tremendously satisfying. It was clear that the evidence we had acquired, in stealing Iran's nuclear archive in 2018, had a great bearing on events. It drew the world's attention to a willful failure to comply with agreements and emphasized the magnitude of the lie that they were engaged in an inherently peaceful nuclear program.

At the time of writing, a ceasefire between Israel and Iran is taking hold. It represents a triumph of coordination between Israel and the United States, a shared military and intelligence triumph. The seamless nature of our partnership reminds me of the impact we made together during President Trump's first term.

Operation Midnight Hammer, the US attack on Iran, to my understanding was fully coordinated. We assessed targets together. We shared intelligence. We dealt with each other transparently and understood each other instinctively. We used the same airspace, because defenses had been destroyed. I cherished watching the special relationship in action.

President Trump's strategy, in giving advance instructions to be ready to attack when negotiations collapsed, was bold and wise. We had mapped out the weak points in the defenses of the Iranian nuclear sites in the past and had shared information about how and where to mount a precise bombing mission.

Since such missions are complex, and not an open book, it will take time for the BDA, the bombardment damage assessment, to be completed. The Iranians may have small batches of enriched uranium hidden, but I believe their enrichment capacity is gone. In my estimation, it will take them years to recover from the events of June 2025.

There is a new perception, even within Iran. The regime thought they were immune. They thought no one would come for them. Israel did, with the US giants at our back. Iran's air force is incapable of chasing our aircraft. Iran turned blind. They are absolutely not to be trusted, but they do not have the means to financially support their proxies. In practical terms, they cannot supply weapons through a new Syria or Lebanon.

I believe a historic opportunity to trigger regime change, through taking down Iran's ayatollahs, was missed, but I appreciate President Trump's desire to make peace in the region. The oil market is stable, and the enlightened leaders shaping the Middle East welcomed his initiative.

As I said at the start of this account, history chooses its moments. All I know is what my heart is telling me. A non-nuclear Iran is the fulfillment of my life's work.

Acknowledgments

This book is one man's story of service to his nation, yet it would not have been written without the help of four separate, distinctive teams. I owe the greatest debt to the most pivotal of those units—my wife, Aya, and my entire family, for their love, support, and understanding.

I offer my thanks, respect, and admiration to my colleagues in the Mossad, who must for obvious reasons remain unnamed. They formed a team that I was proud to lead. They shared my dedication to its founding principles and gave something of themselves, in their own way, to the organization. They have helped to secure Israel's safety and that of the Jewish diaspora.

I will be eternally grateful to my agent, Neil Blair, and to Rory Scarfe and the rest of his team at the Blair Partnership, which includes, in Michael Calvin, a wonderfully perceptive, world-class writer. So much has changed, at speed, during the three years from this book's conception to its conclusion. I valued their professional guidance, persistence, patience, and quiet wisdom. Neil's steadfast commitment to Israel's well-being was evident pre and post the October 7 atrocities.

Finally, I would like to thank Eric Nelson and his team at HarperCollins for guiding this first-time author through the publishing process. I hope fervently that we have given them something of which we can all be proud.

—Yossi Cohen, Tel Aviv, March 2025

About the Author

YOSSI COHEN served as the director of the Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks, otherwise known as the Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, from 2016 until 2021.

Cohen was born to a religious family in Jerusalem. Upon drafting to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Cohen volunteered for the Infantry Combat Brigade. During his military service, he served as a fighter and commander in the First Lebanon War in 1982.

In 1983, Cohen joined the Mossad and successfully trained as a field and covert operations officer. He advanced through the ranks of the Mossad and was later appointed head of the Mossad's operations in several territories.

In 1997, Cohen completed a BA in social sciences, summa cum laude, at Bar Ilan University, as part of the university's special program for members of the Israel Defense Forces.

In 2003, the president of Israel and the minister of defense awarded Cohen the prestigious Israel Defense Prize for his leadership and command of a special operation.

In 2006, Cohen was appointed head of the Mossad's HUMINT intelligence division, which is responsible for the operation of the agency's field officers. The division team headed by Cohen won several Israel Defense Prizes.

In 2011, Cohen was appointed deputy director of the Mossad.

Prior to his appointment as the director of the Mossad, in 2013, Cohen was handpicked by then prime minister of Israel to serve as Israel's national security adviser and as head of the National Security Council. Cohen served as the NSA until January 2016.

In 2016, Cohen was appointed director of the Mossad.

As director of the Mossad, Cohen personally orchestrated some of the Mossad's most daring operations, such as the seizure of the Iranian nuclear

archives, the exposure of which was among the main factors behind the withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal, and clandestine activity all over the world.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel, Cohen advocated for the establishment of a National Emergency Command Center, and, together with Mossad representatives and in cooperation with the Defense Ministry, he led the endeavor to bring vital medical equipment to Israel during the crisis.

In 2020, Cohen led the negotiations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. His unique work with these countries, and the important connections he forged with them, played a significant role in the signing of the groundbreaking Abraham Accords.

In May 2021, Cohen was awarded an honorary doctorate from Bar Ilan University, in recognition of the many decades of his life dedicated to the security of the state of Israel.

In May 2021, William J. Burns, the director of the CIA, presented Cohen with the George J. Tenet Award "in recognition of his steadfast partnership with the CIA and unparalleled contributions to joint operations during his five-year tenure as director of the Mossad."

Cohen is now the head of SoftBank Investment Advisers in Israel.

Cohen and his wife, Aya, live in Israel, and are blessed with four children and eight grandchildren.

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